

A Dirty Hero's Fight for Clean Energy: Satire, Allegory, and Risk Narrative in Ian McEwan's *Solar*

I know I'm going to get it with this one. People are going to say this is a novel against climate change, or a climate change sceptic's novel – because people are so passionately committed to the idea that we're facing a calamity and have to do something very quickly, and any novel that doesn't say that will be very irritating for them. (McEwan, "Warming")

At the appearance of his latest novel, *Solar* (2010), the successful British author was already anticipating significant misunderstandings among his readers. These might be fueled by descriptions of his book such as “the book on climate change,” (Walsh). Although the protagonist works in clean energy research and offers some insight into his discipline or rather his business, his private life clearly catches more attention. Thus, the claim that the novel focuses on climate change is, strictly spoken, as inaccurate as the assertion that the novel is just using it as a framework for its plot—as some of the recent bio thrillers as well as many post 9/11 novels have done in order to illustrate the human condition at the beginning of the 21st century.

In contrast to most other novels ostensibly treating ecological crisis, McEwan's novel does not stage a dystopian future¹ or develop an apocalyptic ecological scenario that culminates in a gigantic collective disaster bringing death to many. Thus, there is neither a climax of delightful horror at the sight of extreme natural events, nor a personified nature taking revenge against humanity. Instead, while portraying our present situation that Ulrich Beck characterizes as “world risk society,” *Solar* relies on the potential of anticipation.² Nevertheless, it fits well into an issue on “writing catastrophes,” since it takes a disastrous course and ends in a personal, professional and financial catastrophe for its protagonist—which would not be interesting for ecocritics if it could not be read as an allegory. Praised as “the first climate-novel by an author of world-class,”³ the novel's quality indeed depends on its allegorical concept, which solves

¹ In an interview conducted by Boyd Tonkin, McEwan argues against dystopia, “We've had so many dystopias that we're brain-dead in that direction,” (McEwan, “I hang on”).

² In this paper, I adhere to a definition of risk suggested by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck as early as the 1990s, but significantly updated in view of climate change in 2007 (see English version from 2008). For general reflections on “narrative in the risk society” as well as on the relation between apocalyptic and risk discourse see Heise 119-143.

³ Thus Thomas Steinfeld quotes the German version's publisher, whose announcement he contradicts in his rather critical review.

a great problem of representation when one decides against dramatizing hurricanes and floods.

Climate change, on the one hand, is a fact provable in numbers of slowly climbing temperatures. On the other hand it is a global risk with side effects on humanity that are difficult to calculate. Some of these consequences are already perceptible around the globe, but many others still belong to the realm of anticipation, which necessarily requires imagination. Thus, there is a special affinity between risk and fiction: the former rests on a lack of secure knowledge and speculation, the latter, for the most part, stages the probable instead of the real. Since risks themselves are mere calculations that can be articulated, but seem hard to translate into an action plot, most novels focus on their disastrous consequences and do not fully seize the potential of anticipation, the motor of suspense, which in fiction all too often leads to catastrophe. Structurally, McEwan's novel in this regard is no exception, but it differs from other novels on climate change because it does not end in a collective climate catastrophe, but transposes the inevitable disaster into an individual's life.

For many years, McEwan has focused in his writing on the differences between risks (as consequences of human decisions and as factors that can be reduced), dangers (of contingent disasters that cannot be prevented), and disaster itself (as the actual event of damage), and he skillfully stages the turning point from anticipation to catastrophe. Before *Solar*, this can be observed in *Saturday* (2005), to name just one other book written in the new millennium that, rather than treating the threat of climate change, illustrates the impact of the omnipresent danger of terrorism on people's lives. A comparison of both novels shows the distinction between intended disasters, like terrorism, and unintended disasters as side effects of a false risk management, as in the case of climate change, as well as of different risk types such as incalculable intentions of others and (at least to some degree) unpreventable natural events. In *Solar*, McEwan's figures have to tackle with both risk types, and the protagonist's (flawed) risk management mirrors the course of action, or rather inaction, of global "environmental" politics.

Soon after the novel's beginning, when the protagonist, Michael Beard, is introduced by an uninvolved narrator, Beard's attitude towards climate change is fully revealed in his stream of consciousness:

Beard was not wholly sceptical about climate change. It was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that comprised the background to the news, and he read about it, vaguely deplored it and

expected governments to meet and take action. And of course he knew that a molecule of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantities. But he himself had other things to think about. And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril', that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds of millions of refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing resources. There was an Old Testament ring to the forewarnings, an air of plague-of-boils and deluge-of-frogs, that suggested a deep and constant inclination, enacted over the centuries, to believe that one was always living at the end of the days, that one's own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world, and therefore made more sense, or was just a little less irrelevant. The end of the world was never pitched in the present, where it could be seen for the fantasy it was, but just around the corner, and when it did not happen, a new issue, a new date would soon emerge. The old world purified by incendiary violence, washed clean by the blood of the unsaved, that was how it had been for Christian millennial sects – death to the unbelievers! And for the Soviet Communists – death to the kulaks! And for the Nazis and their thousand-year fantasy – death to the Jews! And then the truly democratic contemporary equivalent, an all-out nuclear war – death to everyone! When that did not happen, and after the Soviet empire had been devoured by its internal contradictions, and in the absence of any other overwhelming concern beyond boring, intransigent global poverty, the apocalyptic tendency had conjured yet another beast. (McEwan, *Solar* 15-16)

Here and in other parts of the novel, basic knowledge about causes and consequences of climate change is described as commonplace. The demonstrative imprecision, especially coming from the mouth of a scientist, articulates mistrust in the implied prognosis and suggests that the rationalist principally cannot be impressed by horror scenarios. Instead, while quoting the worst ones as mere matters of course characterizing the 21st century, he mocks the risk discourse that is not just prevalent in the mass media, but also in scientific papers. His tone not only shows the indifference of the confident egoist, but also his professional habituation to risk. In comparing it to various historical variants of apocalyptic discourse, which he unveils as errors, Beard defames risk discourse in general without being able to disprove the actual prognoses. His relativistic argumentation is quite provocative; as examples of absurd action rooting in irrational fears, he names groups whose beliefs have long been publicly disqualified.

Presumably the author, McEwan, whose uninvolved narrator does not morally condemn his protagonist, counts on the reader's ability to recognize the stupidity of Beard's undifferentiated comparison—a risky presumption. Some might consider Beard's attitude to be comforting and comfortable, while others are alarmed to realize that such an attitude is widespread and hinders the fight against climate change. Most likely, alarming the reader by negative examples is more effective than instructing by good examples—but we have not discussed McEwan's own position yet. Regardless, the reader is invited to contradict Beard's argument, for instance by saying that prognoses are not entirely false when they do not adhere to specific dates and numbers. Perhaps, in

this example, Beard's scepticism regarding the imprecision of disaster prognosis is less directed against science than against its handling by the mass media, thus here it still remains debatable whether he denies the risk or just its public discussion.

At other instances, it becomes clear that he is not alarmed by the predictions because he simply does not care about the future of humanity. Here, reproducing the predictions in the conditional, he pitilessly quotes and comments on what "everyone"⁴ fears:

The Gulf Stream would vanish, Europeans would freeze to death in their beds, the Amazon would be a desert, some continents would catch fire, others would drown, and by 2085 the Arctic summer ice would be gone and the polar bears with it. Beard had heard these predictions before and believed none of them. And if he had, he would not have been alarmed. A childless man at a certain age at the end of his fifth marriage could afford a touch of nihilism. (McEwan, *Solar* 75)

These are his thoughts during an expedition to the North Pole, to where he goes along with artists concerned with climate change to "see global warming for himself," (46)—not in order to verify what is being said and written, rather to distract himself from his pending fifth divorce by mocking the helpless and ineffective idealism of his fellow travellers, since "Idealism was so alien to his nature," (77). Apart from his cynical comments and his self-representation as savior of humanity with the aid of wind energy ("He was among scientific illiterates and could have said anything," 74), the funny episode contains two other important elements: first, the allegorical description of the chaos in the "boot room" demonstrates the inability of the group to support each other and organize themselves harmoniously for the common goal of contributing to public awareness of the ecological crisis. Beard's reflections on the egoistic behavior of all group members stealing equipment from each other, which justify his pessimistic outlook, have been read as a key to McEwan's own position.⁵ Beard identifies the "disgrace that was the boot room" as "[e]vidently, a matter of human nature" and rhetorically asks, "How were they to save the earth—assuming it needed saving, which he doubted—when it was so much larger than the boot room?" (78). Whereas his generalistic answer—"Boot rooms needed good systems so that flawed creatures could use them properly," (79)—remains one of his very few reasonable statements and has no practical consequences.

⁴ See for example: "Everyone but Beard was worried about global warming," (McEwan, *Solar* 67).

⁵ See Goodbody 142 and earlier Garrard 717-718 relying on Daniel Zalewski's report of a conversation with McEwan, in which the author reveals the inspiration for the novel and for this particular episode, namely, an expedition to the Arctic Ocean arranged by Cape Farewell, an organization concerned with climate change. See also McEwan's expedition blog (McEwan, "Boot Room").

The second and no less symbolically important element of the Arctic episode is Beard's "deliverance from the jaws of the polar bear," (72) that was chasing him, because it made him swear to change his life for the better. This proves to be another resolution that never comes into effect, but some readers might be deluded—just like his fictional audience—in hearing Beard's speech on the promise of solar energy, given a few years later at a conference where he vigorously promotes clean energy (148-156). This passage from the middle of the novel, which complements the first one quoted above and is the longest one on the causes of climate change and the possibilities of renewable energy, surely profited from the author's dialogue with numerous climate scientists. It was praised by Stefan Rahmstorf, one of the leading German climate scientists from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who is mentioned in the author's "Acknowledgements" and has written a review of the novel on a website for climate science (see Rahmstorf). There, the specialist wonders that a novelist "can write such a speech better than a scientist" and coquettishly admits that he was almost tempted to steal and use it himself.

However, this rhetorically refined speech, which contains so much instructional information, is one of the comic highlights in this satire. Significantly, the speaker opens with the simple, but metaphorical statement: "The planet [...] is sick," (McEwan, *Solar* 148). Beard himself is surprised at his own words, which are quite untypical for him. They do not refer to the ecological situation, but to his own condition, in general as well as specifically after having eaten a load of fish right before entering the stage. Allegory cannot be more explicit than in this first sentence. While fighting his increasing nausea, he automatically unwinds an argument on how to solve the energy crisis, in which he still does not believe any more than before, but from which he now knows he can profit. In his plea for solar energy he uses the same picture—of the thirsty man in the woods axing down the trees to drink their sap, instead of opening his mouth to the pouring rain—his former rival once unsuccessfully used to convince him of the crisis (see 27 and 153). Beard's nausea intensifies and ends in his vomiting behind the curtain; the hypocrite gets violently sick at his own words. Beard's speech is staged as mock theatre and is played by an actor knowing his role all too well.

Still believing in the existence of a good side in Beard, that is, a "scientific talent" and a true "concern for saving humanity," which contradicts his "lazy and chaotic" side, Goodbody considers Beard a psychologically implausible figure (145). Rahmstorf points

out that McEwan avoided moralizing by making his protagonist “thoroughly pathetic and unlikeable.” What both critics overlook is that this is not a case of a good and brilliant scientist fighting for the right thing, though unfortunately personally unlikable, but simply of a bad scientist who jumps on the train for clean energy only to rehabilitate his reputation and make money. Thus, he’s no role model and does not throw the reader into any conflict of judgement. The reader suspects quite from the beginning that Beard would never make a good decision, since “he did not believe in profound inner change” (McEwan, *Solar* 66).

In any case, there is a fundamental psychological interest that rises over all other aspects in *Solar* and is paramount in many of McEwan’s other novels as well. “The novel is an act of imaginative empathy,” states Mick Brown in an interview with McEwan, “[a]nd empathy, as McEwan observes, is ‘the building block of morality’” (McEwan, “Warming”). However, the author in this context also explains: “The thing that would have killed the book for me, I’m sure, is if I’d taken up any sort of moral position [...] I needed a get-out clause. And the get-out clause is, this is an investigation of human nature, with some of the latitude thrown in by comedy.” Surely in view of passages like the one lastly discussed and all others where Beard involuntarily makes a fool of himself, McEwan’s interviewer states that “*Solar* could rightly be described as his first comic novel.”⁶ And, by referring to Greg Garrard’s distinction between tragic and comic apocalypses and Joseph Meerkker’s recommendation of the comic mode for the instruction of ecological behavior, Goodbody labels *Solar* as a “comic apocalypse” modelled after the picaresque novel (138-139). It should be added that McEwan transposes the apocalyptic scheme onto the life of an individual. The humorous and satiric elements of the adventurous episodes, which the hero always just survives in the picaresque novel, can be found in *Solar*, too. But in view of this old genre’s age specific traits that are difficult to discover in the 21st-century novel, I suggest describing *Solar*’s plot structure more abstractly as risk narrative. That means, apart from the explicit discourse on climate change, the principles of risk also unfold in the novel’s plot.

Solar reads very well as risk narrative because its protagonist continually has to make difficult, far reaching decisions. In fact, he risks everything: all professional

⁶ Interestingly, McEwan’s humor seems to have triggered culturally diverse reactions. Summarizing critical reviews from major American newspapers, Shivani rigorously concludes, “These critics’ narrow view of what constitutes serious moral fiction excludes huge realms of style and form and structure, and makes them unable to read the particular variant on narrative ethics or moral fiction McEwan enacts in *Solar*.”

functions, his income and reputation when he steals the intellectual property of his colleague; his freedom when he gives false testimony before court, the love of the women he is involved with when he cheats on them repeatedly, the affection of his child, his health and ultimately his life with his hazardous lifestyle. In all these professional and private realms, all aspects and stages of risk—the intentional ignoring of possible consequences, the occurrence of which demands counteractions which generate side-effects until complete loss of control—are enacted several times before Beard dies at the climax of his self-made disaster. Abstractly seen, this suspense-creating plot scheme may be valid for many novels of various contents. In *Solar*, however, it is not just an invisible skeleton, because all faces of risk allegorically refer to that of climate change, the only one truly relevant for the reader.

Beard's story does not only in its entirety constitute an allegory, but it is peppered with allegorical episodes that function as *mise en abyme*. The funniest and psychologically most brilliant of these is a scene that takes place during a train ride when Beard's exorbitant voracity draws him into a trial of strength with a stranger, when he steals salty crisps from him. In the end, he loses this silent battle, realizing that he must have seemed "a vicious madman," (127). Along with other episodes—such as his street fight that ends with Beard being handcuffed, arrested by the police and forced to resign from his post at the Centre for Renewable Energy—this one is to be read as foreshadowing his downfall.

In the last part of the novel, which takes place in 2009, Beard has seemingly recovered from previous self-inflicted misadventures and now plans to celebrate himself as a hero in "his quest to rescue humankind from self-destruction" (223) at the official presentation of the Lordsburg Artificial Photosynthesis Plant, which he built on the stolen drafts of his former post-doc student. But this glorious event has to be cancelled because all negative outcomes of his disastrous personal risk management now surface at once in a great showdown. He is accused of theft of intellectual property, the solar plant is destroyed by the man he sent to prison with false testimony, the mother of his unwanted little child learns about his mistress, and he learns that he has skin cancer and an overall bad health prognosis. Thus, he now also physically embodies the "sick earth" he spoke of earlier. Before he can get away to avoid being imprisoned, abandoned, or hospitalized, he breaks down and dies of heart attack—that, ironically seen, saves him from a worse fate. But what does Beard's death mean in view of the

allegorical reading of his story? Is it a dark prognosis for the planet, or a happy ending that makes room for good scientists and idealists, like Tom Aldous? Why did the only truly ecological thinker have to die stumbling over the polar bear rug which decorates the living room of Beard, who, in contrast, does not care for nature?

There has been speculation on McEwan's own position vis-à-vis the ecological crisis in almost all critical and scholarly texts on *Solar*. Of course, his attitude is not identical with Beard's, as supposed by some. McEwan does indeed seem to be as sceptical as Beard, but he is not a sceptic of climate change, as he feared himself to be accused of. Instead, he is a sceptic of humanity's ability to change. Overlooking ecological discourse in McEwan's works, Garrard—whose speculations date before *Solar*'s publication—states that the author has, within the last decade, fundamentally changed his attitude from an ecofeminist one, as articulated in *The Child in Time* (1987), to what he calls Darwinian Environmentalism. While earlier McEwan “found hope for the human and nonhuman worlds in politico-moral transformation of individual (male) gender identities and their corresponding institutions,” he now “implicitly identifies the origin of environmental crisis in the interaction of contingent historical circumstances and the universal (to some extent sex-differentiated) psychological tendencies known, for convenience, as ‘human nature,’” (Garrard 706-707). Basically agreeing with this, Goodbody praises McEwan not only for eschewing naïve idealism and false comfort, but also for not giving up all hope (145)—an element rarely discovered by other critics. Whoever asks McEwan in person about his position in the climate debate might be surprised to hear that, in the environmentalist Stewart Brand's typology (consisting of “outright ideological deniers, who believe that man-made global warming is a myth,” “sceptics whose minds will change as the data comes in,” “warners—people who have looked at the data and feel that it's pretty alarming” and “calamatists who feel it's all going to be over next week and we're in a handcart to hell”), he considers himself a warner (McEwan, “Warming”). At the same time, he tends to duck the responsibility of promoting change as citizen and artist.⁷ He accordingly refrains from presenting examples of ecological behavior as in stereotypical Eco-Thrillers, in which the good opposes and finally wins over the bad. In the end, McEwan counts on the intelligence of

⁷ While in 2008 McEwan said of literature, “I don't think it can do much about climate change. I suppose it can reflect the problem and pose the problem in terms that might be useful to people,” (Roberts 191) in 2010 he insisted that “it is not the job of the novelists to save the world” (McEwan, “Warming”).

his readers. So let's rather read his worries about being misunderstood as a commitment to playfully risking misunderstandings that excite reflection and discussion.

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