

## The Single Source

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British ecocritics have been eagerly awaiting Ian McEwan's novel *Solar*, which came out last month. Advance discussion in the press suggested that the novel might be a major intervention. For the first time, a leading literary novelist had made global warming the explicit and central subject of a work. The novel would show what literary realism could do with that subject. Having read it hot from the press, I want to say something about what *Solar* does and doesn't do, and the way its achievements and omissions illuminate the tasks facing ecocriticism.

*Solar*'s anti-hero protagonist is Michael Beard, a Nobel prize-winning physicist who attempts to develop a new solar energy technology – a technique for producing artificial photosynthesis. Beard's efforts are in a dialectical relationship with the spectacular mess of his personal life, which frequently gives him occasion to improvise wildly. Unable to resist sex or food, he spends much of his time frantically trying to salvage, manage or escape his various relationships with women, while ignoring a crescendo of warnings from his indulged and abused body. The novel's main strategy, in relation to the political, ethical and psychological questions raised by climate change, is to make Beard a comically excessive figure but nevertheless a broadly representative one. Naïve, selfish, extravagant, pathetic, indefatigable, insensitive, subject to numerous pratfalls and drawn into melodramatic plot-twists, he seems both larger and smaller than a real person – larger in his comic-epic quality and smaller in his emotional and imaginative range. Yet in one respect he represents a broad mass of people. His failure to restrain or change his appetites for the sake of long-term well-being – his own and humanity's - represents the collective failing of wealthy consumers to change their behaviour in response to the threat of global warming. In places – when a party of concerned artists and scientists on an expedition to inspect Arctic glaciers cannot resist pilfering each other's equipment left in the boot room, for example - the novel comes close to the condition of allegory.

Motifs recognisable from McEwan's previous fiction are brought into the service of this strategy. At times one feels he is trotting them out with a wry self-referentiality, as if he wants to foreground the fact that he is resorting to his established repertoire. They include questions of what to do with dead bodies, violent obsessive men returning to seek vengeance,

misunderstandings in the middle of love-making, ingenious scenarios based on game theory, debates between scientists and artists, and sudden emergencies that plunge easy-going, rational men into acts they would never have imagined. That is the unmistakable McEwan package. Reviewers so far have mainly concentrated on the ways in which Beard's personal life undermines his effort to find technologies to save us from climate change. And Beard is merely the most conspicuous example. The effort is beset on all sides by individuals heedlessly pursuing their own short-term desires and ambitions. *Solar* is anti-heroic on a general scale. The crisis doesn't bring the best out of anybody. No one rises to the occasion. Or the one person who does is killed-off early on, dying in a freak accident when he too has just endangered his scientific work through sexual risk-taking.

What has not been so much remarked, however, is that there is also a reverse-effect in the novel. Beard's technological project is undermined by the chaos of his personal life and other people's, but it also arises from that chaos. Personal emergencies and chance accidents bounce him into his project, which really gets going once an insensitive remark has cost Beard a comfortable academic sinecure, throwing him upon his own devices. The development of the photosynthesis scheme is motivated by the restless energy of his appetites and defensive ruses. At the end, it looks as if Beard's particular commercial venture will collapse, destroyed as a result of his multiple follies, but the discoveries he has made and assisted may yet have a saving potential in the hands of others, who will take the project forward for similarly self-serving reasons. In the midst of its pessimism, the novel keeps alive – just about – this ironical possibility: that ignoble, clumsy, unselfconscious, earthy vitality may be the saving of us, not idealism, far-sightedness and a sense of potential tragedy.

This novel's closest kin in ecocriticism may therefore be Joseph Meeker's proto-ecocritical work *The Comedy of Survival* (1974). Ecocritics sometimes cite this book respectfully, but its argument has not been much taken-up and developed, and at the moment is an ecocritical road whose construction ceased almost immediately. Meeker's central contention is that comic insensibility and detachment - the way in which characters in a comedy do not react to threatening events with the emotional vulnerability displayed by those in tragedy or realistic fiction – is a basic survival mechanism. He describes watching a female caribou leave the migrating herd to give birth. The emerging calf is instantly seized and devoured by a grizzly bear. Meeker and his fellow-observers react with horror and grief. One might call it cosmic horror - grief for a world in which such things can happen. But the mother caribou, 'with every hormone in her body raging' (Meeker 1997: 14), remains a caribou and quickly returns to normal behaviour. 'Comedy,' says Meeker, 'demonstrates that

humans are durable, although they may be weak, stupid, and undignified. As the tragic hero suffers or dies for ideals, the comic hero survives without them' (15).

For the best literary response to environmental crisis, Meeker recommends the picaresque tradition, of day-to-day, on the road, adventure and improvisation, as against the pastoral tradition with its lament for lost purity and its dream of balance and harmony. What seems anti-ecological about pastoral to Meeker is the stasis that the dream seeks and implies. Meeker sees in this a denial of the constant adaptation that ecology reveals to us. Tragedy too denies this will-to-adaptation. The tragic hero's refusal to compromise - preferring death to the acceptance of a world that does not permit the ideal - is for Meeker a rejection of ecological continuity. In contrast, the pícaro - the protagonist of picaresque - 'is hopeless only in the sense that he sees hope to be an irrelevant concept, an unjustifiable expectation of the future that offers no help in dealing with present problems. (...) In the picaresque tradition, people are shown living as other animals live, confronting the present defensively and opportunistically, (...) and above all adaptive to the immediate environment' (72).

Beard is a version of Meeker's pícaro, albeit an unsympathetic one. Formidably good at adapting to his immediate short-term environment, he is catastrophically poor at adapting to long-term considerations. What was long-term, of course, eventually becomes short-term. Meeker was writing before the threat of global warming had entered the public domain. He did not have to contend with a coming catastrophe predicted by scientists but not visible in the immediate environment. Adapting to our immediate environment will not necessarily help us respond to such a danger, and may even hinder us. McEwan's novel shows us this hindrance aplenty, while representing bodily appetite and immediate contingency as the primary sources of vitality and ingenuity - the mechanism by which solar energy, the true single source of vitality, is channelled into diverse human activity. One can see why ecocritics have not done much with Meeker's argument. He seems to be saying that the forms of self-consciousness generated by environmentalism's new temporal and global perspectives - the new sense of responsibility for the future and for the ecosphere produced by perceptions of long-range ecological relations - are merely overpowering and likely to induce tragic despair.

Ecocritics have not followed-up Meeker's interest in picaresque comedy, nor had much to say about comedy of any other kind. Many, however, have invested a great deal of hope in a different idea of responsiveness to the immediate environment: the rediscovered bodily responsiveness that goes under the name of 'embodiedness' or 'embeddedness'. Ecocritics of various persuasions have presented this awakening of bodily awareness, and

awareness of the body, as a corrective to consumerism's suppression of ecological connections. Important projects in ecocriticism at the moment include the effort to combine this vision with the long range global and temporal perspectives it would seem to exclude – Ursula Heise's recent *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* has led this attempt – and the efforts of Queer Ecocriticism to ensure that the vision of embodiedness will be diverse rather than restrictively normative. Catriona Sandilands and Stacy Alaimo have been leaders here.

In this context, McEwan's novel provides a useful reminder that the spectacle of bodily appetites and vulnerabilities has frequently been deployed in the mock-heroic tradition for conservative purposes. It is a reminder that in making bodily sensation and appetite the basis of a daring vision of change, ecocriticism is performing something of a cultural reversal. Which side is the body on? Revolutionaries have often seen bodily appetites – especially sex – as an energy of resistance to the alienation from our natures imposed by industrial modernity. The body's vulnerability and mortality have been foregrounded to counter the illusions of limitless plenty put about by consumerism. Yet the frailties of the body have also been invoked, traditionally, to bring daring visions of change into ridicule. Mock-heroic comedy exposes those visions of change as impractical because incompatible with a human nature conceived in conservative terms; or it exposes them as pretensions motivated by the old familiar competitive desires. The common accusation that environmentalism is a pretext for being pious or 'smug' is in this tradition. *L'homme moyen sensuel* has usually been set in dramatic contrast to abstract thinkers and their flights, but Beard is both at once – a visionary intellectual in his science and spectacularly *moyen sensuel* in the other parts of his life. This is possible because of the extreme specialisation and abstraction of his scientific work; its degree of separateness, which, in turn, is the problem, because the content of his work has scarcely any capacity to intervene in his life.

Beard is dismissive of the arts and humanities, those cultural and academic practices that do address themselves to the whole human being, intellectual, emotional and physical. After successfully simulating an interest in Milton in order to win the heart of the woman who becomes his first wife, he suspects the university arts subjects of being a gigantic bluff, and at the Arctic conference he reacts with derision to the presence of novelists – as if they had anything to contribute! McEwan's novel is uneasily mocking its own pretensions here, but, more than that, it significantly fails to counter Beard's view, not identifying itself with his attitude, exactly, but not providing any positive evidence to refute him. In this respect, McEwan sets ecocritics a challenge: prove Beard wrong about this. Prove that the arts and

humanities can give him what he lacks. The novel's own absences and deficiencies show the way.

There is a bitter, almost Hardy-esque irony to the novel, in the way that the heavily and blatantly orchestrated plot works to invert any lingering, vestigial idea that providence will see us through the crisis of global warming. Beard's reckless personal life ripens to its catastrophic crisis just hours before the scheduled switch-on at which his invention is to prove itself. A day later might have made all the difference. It is a piece of fateful timing suggestive of Thomas Hardy. But the comparison immediately reveals what is lacking in McEwan's novel: the full emotional and moral range of which the realistic novel is capable (of which Hardy, with his unusual way of implicating the reader in a shared world with the characters, offers an especially pertinent example). By separating Beard's intellectual and personal appetites so completely, and by including no character with a more complex mixture of emotional responses to the global warming threat, McEwan seems to suggest that the outcome will not be influenced by emotional struggle and the efforts of conscience – a fatalism that would not only sideline the arts and humanities but environmental politics as well. What stands out more and more, as I think about this novel, is that odd ruefulness with which it parades its author's trademark motifs. At one point McEwan gives to a character, more or less word for word, a powerful insight expressed directly in 2007 by the novelist John Lanchester:

She approved of his mission and loyally read climate-change stories in the press. But she told him once that to take the matter seriously would be to think about it all the time. Everything else shrank before it. And so, like everyone she knew, she could not take it seriously, not entirely. Daily life would not permit it. (McEwan 2010: 165; see Lanchester 2007: 3)

In Lanchester's direct confession, this was an agonised statement, trapping the argument in an impasse between the two unbearable propositions of not thinking about global warming at all and thinking about nothing else. Here it is a throwaway remark, resonant for the reader but passed over by the character; a real excuse for brushing the subject aside. This may be a true reflection of the way many people react, but the novel, in sum, does little or nothing to challenge it. McEwan, in this novel, turns away from what one might expect realist fiction to attempt in the face of climate change. He does not explore the emotional complexity of our responses to the threat. And if it is true that we are, collectively, evading its emotional import,

as Lanchester suggested, then McEwan avoids the task of imagining for us, and showing us in artistic form, the feelings we do not yet dare to have.

## Works Cited

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