

“No Laughable Thing under the Sun”: Satire, Realism, and the Crisis of Climate Change in Ian McEwan’s *Solar*

Michael Beard, the Nobel prize-winning physicist and protagonist of Ian McEwan’s 2011 novel *Solar*, “would not have believed it possible that he would be in a room... with so many seized by the same particular assumption, that it was art in its highest forms... that would lift climate change as a subject, gild it, palpate it, reveal all the horror and lost beauty and awesome threat and inspire the public to take thought, take action, or demand it of others” (90). In a 2011 interview, McEwan discusses his decision to write *Solar*, a work of art which indeed revolves explicitly around the idea of catastrophic climate change. “I always thought it was the most intractable subject for a novel,” McEwan muses. “So impacted with science, statistics... and more importantly, with a sort of moral load that was going to make the novel a very uncomfortable form for it” (“Climate”). Here, character and author gesture toward related questions concerning the relationship between the aesthetics and politics of climate crisis in the age of the Anthropocene. Both men wonder not just whether art can represent this crisis, but if such art can actually inspire an effective public response. *Solar* is indeed an “uncomfortable” novel in the ways in which it addresses this question. It is unflinchingly realist in its treatment of the urgency and seeming irreversibility of global warming. At the same time, it is also overwhelmingly satirical, perhaps even funny. The humor of *Solar*, however, does not signify a form of merriment or carnivalesque release so much as it makes us squirm in our seats. It is more akin to what Aaron Matz terms “satirical realism,” in which “to describe the world in starkly realist detail... is to expose this same world’s essential folly and error” (IX). McEwan’s protagonist Beard epitomizes all those aspects of human nature which have brought Earth to the brink of collapse; the fact that he is ostensibly working to develop alternative energy sources and ameliorate environmental disaster means that he is essentially fighting a losing battle with his very self. The failure

of Beard's scientific efforts, I suggest, is tied to his stubborn refusal to embrace any degree of critical self-awareness and subsequently to change his own personal habits. More importantly, this problem can be mapped onto a broader framework of climate change, implying that no scientific initiatives can or will produce appreciable change unless such self-reflexivity is also inaugurated at the individual level. This paper will investigate whether or not the comic mode constitutes an appropriate or productive response to climate crisis. Through readings of McEwan's *Solar* and interrogations of the genre of satirical realism, I propose that the particular form of satire which characterizes anthropogenic climate change does not seek to be corrective or cathartic so much as it critically eulogizes the integrity of the planet and of an image of human beings as competent, willing stewards of it.

In his 2000 article "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny?" Sander Gilman poses the following set of questions about the relationship between humor and catastrophe. "Can horror be understood through laughter?" Gilman asks. "...Is there an earned laughter that teaches and a false laughter that obfuscates?" (281-282). Since the particular horror Gilman examines is the Holocaust, the division between forms of laughter seems to gesture to a particular kind of historical knowledge, which is also a type of self-awareness. The laughter that "teaches," that is "earned," suggests a concomitant labor and even sacrifice. It seems potentially rueful and even critical; if anything, this laughter reacts to—and acknowledges—the folly of our own human actions. By mocking ourselves (or at the very least, our legacy) it admits that we are worthy of being shamed and it "teaches" us how (not) to be in the future by mobilizing our own negative example. On the other hand, the "false," obfuscating laughter Gilman cites uses laughter as a way to *avoid* precisely such self-reflection. Instead, it belittles, trivializes, and diverts attention away from the grim realities of tragedies such as the Holocaust and our role in them.

As Gilman assesses the role of the comic mode in responses to the Holocaust, however, he finds few sources—or instances—of actual laughter (as he wryly points out, “no one ever actually laughed while reading *Maus*”) (282). The “comic voice,” Gilman points out, “is not the voice of the comic. There is no intention for the reader...to laugh” (284). Insofar as humor may function as a rebellious gesture of self-assertion or a coping mechanism, Gilman argues, it depends upon the (ideally Jewish) identity of those deploying it and the explicit aim of parodying or attacking the Nazi perpetrators. Vague or broad satire can unintentionally trivialize the entire situation of the Holocaust, implicating victims as well as aggressors in its caricature.

But to swerve slightly away from Gilman’s thematic context, how does the comic mode function in relation to crisis when its victims and aggressors are the same group—and moreover, when the crisis in question is ongoing in the present, without the possibility of distanced, historical self-reflection? In the case of the Anthropocene, such a crisis constitutes an entire era. The term “Anthropocene” originated in 2000 when Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer suggested it as a designation for a new geological epoch, dating from approximately the late 18th-century (17). Broadly speaking, it refers to the industrial age in which man’s activities acquired the power to act as a geological force. The Anthropocene is also, not coincidentally, the age of climate change and global warming. Thus although global warming constitutes “a catastrophe” in Michael Beard’s terms, human beings are not merely its victims—they are also the architects of their own potential downfall. Therefore, in Anthropocene satire, any comic attempt to shore up a victimized self simultaneously functions as a critical parody of that very self.

Furthermore, since the Anthropocene is an ongoing epoch, one does not have the luxury of distanced reflection. Instead, every instant in which one fails to properly acknowledge and engage with the reality of the Anthropocene—to choose the laughter that teaches over the laughter that obfuscates—only adds fuel to the ever-growing fire of

global warming. Here, time is of the essence. Any and all failures to critically self-reflect on the conditions of the Anthropocene actually propagate its effects, since the only way to prevent its catastrophic accumulations is to take active political and social actions to reduce them. If the Anthropocene is an ongoing crisis, it is also a crisis that we have the opportunity—and the imperative—to productively address. But, as Žižek suggests in *Living in the End Times*, the contemporary moment’s “socio-political reality itself imposes multiple versions of external intrusions, traumas... brutal but meaningless interruptions that destroy the symbolic texture of the subject’s identity” (292). In this way, the traumatic reality of climate change (and therefore of our own potential extinction as a species) might simply be, as it is for McEwan’s protagonist, only “one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that made up the background to the news” (17). Climate change, then, might be merely another facet of modernity wearing away at the individual subject, and prompting no response other than weary, overwhelmed indifference. Comedy of the Anthropocene, therefore, might produce nothing more than an bizarrely inflected form of elegy, the “grief equivalent of canned laughter” which does “the mourning for you,” in a socio-political climate in which no one has the time—or inclination—to actually mourn its myriad tragedies (Morton 105). But if it is possible to bring attention to the sustained crisis of the Anthropocene, this might be best achieved not through the media, regular purveyors of such dime-a-dozen disasters, but through a turn to realist art which directly addresses the causes, characteristics, and consequences of climate change. The question, though, is whether or not this rendering—even if it is both richly realist and satirical in nature—can *change* as well as represent the current state of affairs.

Michael Beard is not initially interested in the idea of climate science. Although “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,” he had “other things to think about. And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in peril... There was an Old Testament ring to the forewarnings” (17-18). Beard is not an irrational man, and he is not a man unable to understand the scientific realities of anthropogenic climate change. He is simply apathetic. Moreover, he is admittedly annoyed by the inflamed rhetoric of crisis and even apocalypse that coalesces around the subject, as if the problem would cease to be a problem should people simply stop drawing attention to it.

For a young postdoctoral fellow at the Center where Beard has been installed as a figurehead in his unproductive post-Nobel years, however, climate change is *the* issue. Tom Aldous has devoted his life to developing modes of solar energy (in particular, artificial photosynthesis) to replace humans’ damaging reliance on fossil fuels. For Beard in the novel’s early sections, the very term “solar energy” has “a dubious halo of meaning, an invocation of New Age Druids dancing around Stonehenge at Midsummer’s dusk” (28). Again, Beard takes issue with the (perceived) rhetoric of climate change, equating the endorsement of change to extant scientific/industrial techniques with (in his view) outmoded and irrational pagan rituals. Even worse, “there were novels Aldous wanted him to read—novels!—and developments in contemporary music... and documentaries about climate change,” all of it expressed with such thoroughly *insufferable* “enthusiasm. This was what he disliked about political people” (33, 41). Not only does Beard find the idea of appealing to artistic or cultural mediums patently absurd with regard to climate change, he expresses skepticism elsewhere in the novel on the issue of art in general. Beard reminisces about the process of seducing his first wife during college, in which he spent a week intensely reading Milton and associated criticism in order to impress a literature student named Maisie. Because he is able to pull off the coup, so to speak, and pass himself off as a Milton aficionado, Beard realizes that

among the “arts people...there was nothing they talked about that anyone with half a brain could fail to understand. He had read four essays on Milton. He *knew*” (234).

Beard believes that literary representation is merely another form of knowledge to be worked out and memorized programmatically, with far less effort than would be required to master scientific theories. But his laziness and self-satisfaction are evident even in this early instance: his smug, uncompromising statement that “he *knew*” after dabbling in a bit of criticism suggests that as a general rule, Beard hesitates to “take the matter seriously,” whether it comes to climate change or Milton, because to do so “would be to think about it all the time” (191). Furthermore, the novel slyly suggests that Beard’s single instance of truly “knowing” anything—the development of his Nobel-winning Beard-Einstein Conflation—is made possible by his temporary immersion as a young scientist in “daydreams—manic moments, brief neural bursts, compacted but cloudy episodes that braided the actual with the unreal and threaded gaudy beads of the impossible, the outrageous, and the contradictory along thought-lines of indeterminate logic” (134).

If this mode of thought has any disciplinary associations, it surely gestures more toward the poetic than the measured, formulaic scientific ideal Beard believes he espouses. And in fact his own recollections of his younger work consistently highlight the inspired and tirelessly enthused nature of his endeavors. The younger Michael Beard in this respect shares many similarities with Tom Aldous, and perhaps proves that this fervor and openness to artistic modes of production are precisely (part of) what is needed to produce good science—especially science capable of turning back the tides of climate change. However, the tone of McEwan’s novel questions the very nature of aesthetic engagement with the Anthropocene. If his work is an example of “ecological art,” it is certainly not of the “happy-happy-joy-joy eco-sincerity” mode that Timothy Morton cites as inapplicable to the contemporary moment. Instead, it is “ironic, full of darkness and

unfathomable depths and deceptive shallows” (105). This darkness seems to encapsulate both the future of the planet and the hearts of the men who pillage (or purport to save) it for profit. The depths of their depravity and the shallow nature of their incentives combine to form a product that cannot be aligned with a poetic transcendence. Instead, *Solar* emerges as part of a starkly, darkly realist tradition, which simultaneously entertains the possibilities of scientific discovery and the limits of its political applications.

For on a purely scientific level, it is Aldous’ application of the Beard-Einstein Conflation to the field of photovoltaics which seems to create the possibility for large-scale solar energy initiatives. Unfortunately, Aldous pitches the specifics of his plan at a rather inopportune time: Beard has returned home to find Aldous engaging in an affair with his estranged wife. Although the marriage (Beard’s fifth) is ending because of his own constant dalliances, Beard is unwilling to hear the postdoc’s proposal and moreover, suggests that Aldous will be fired from the Center. In his desperation, Aldous slips on a polar bear rug (proving rather smugly that dead polar bears never bode well for discussions of climate change) and fatally impales himself on a glass coffee table.

It takes several years for Beard to realize that it would be a good idea to steal the ideas and plans from proposals Aldous had prepared for him before his death, but when part two of the novel takes up Beard’s story after a five-year interim period, we emerge into a time when “planetary stupidity was his business” (128). Not his concern, nor even his cause célèbre, but his *business*. Beard’s apparent crusade against such stupidity is catalyzed entirely by self-interest, in the form of monetary gain and reclaimed fame in the scientific world (at one point he thinks rather ruefully that there was “no means of... franchising the neatly-etched half moon”) (319). Not only is he unconcerned about the actual “sickness” of the Earth, but in fact relies upon—even takes comfort from—the continued existence of this crisis. When his business associate expresses fear that the

planet might not actually be warming, rendering their investments in new solar initiatives useless, Beard responds with “good news.” “The UN,” he reassures his friend, “estimates that already a third of a million people a year are dying from climate change... There’s drought in the Amazon rain forest. Methane is pouring out of the Siberian permafrost... It’s a catastrophe. Relax!” (251). If this statement is meant to evoke laughter in McEwan’s readership, it must be an incredulous reaction to the juxtaposition of Beard’s last declaration and his associated imperative. But Beard’s business partner finds nothing at all amiss with the statement, gesturing toward the fact that for so many individuals, the real catastrophe is not the loss of the planet, but the loss of a financial opportunity.

Beard’s callousness is here parodied to a remarkable degree, but his advice to “Relax!” also reveals how little he cares about the fates of others (those unlucky “third of a million people”) when weighed against the potential fulfillment of his own desires. In fact, it becomes apparent that Beard’s obsession with immediate self-gratification even means that he cares very little about his own (ultimate) fate. Although he has arguably loved (at least some of) his wives, he has had a constant stream of extramarital affairs, and has destroyed five marriages in the process. He eats and drinks to excess, even to the point of becoming violently ill. He ignores physical symptoms including chest pain, lightheadedness, exhaustion, kidney trouble, and joint pain. And perhaps most potently, in the novel’s final section, Beard becomes increasingly aware of a “reddish brown blotch, a map of unknown territory” on the back of his hand (276). After months of inactivity, he has a doctor test it only to confirm that it is a potentially metastatic melanoma. “Don’t be a denier,” his doctor warns Beard, “appearing to refer back to their earlier climate-change chats. ‘This won’t go away just because you don’t want it or are not thinking about it’” (277). Here McEwan explicitly links Beard’s stubborn reluctance to deal with the cancer poised to spread throughout his body with the phenomenon of climate-change denial. In fact, the doctor’s exhortation to Beard could

easily be read as a statement on the necessity of acknowledging, containing, and “treating” anthropogenic climate change.

Beard’s body becomes a stand-in for the suffering planet in other ways throughout the novel. After he gorges himself on rich hors d’oeuvres at a reception encouraging corporate representatives to invest in solar energy initiatives, Beard’s physical state is likened to that of a polluted coastline. He feels “an oily nausea at something monstrous and rotten from the sea stranded on the tidal mudflats of a stagnant estuary, decaying gaseously in his gut and welling up, contaminating his breath, his words, and suddenly his thoughts” (170). The physicist’s symptoms are vividly, realistically rendered and notably unpleasant—but he has also effectively dug his own grave. Beard’s abuse of his own body, through over-consumption and apathy, not only mirrors the damage the human species has done to Earth, but explicitly satirizes it. Michael Beard is in many ways pathetic and unlikable, but he is not an entirely foreign character. In his unwillingness to sacrifice convenience, live moderately or to forego his immediate desires in favor of long-term wellness, we see the modern human condition writ large. Civilization, as Beard sees it, whether in political, industrial, or moral terms, is quite frankly doomed. The metropolitan spaces Beard observes from airplanes appear as “giant concrete wounds dressed with steel, the catheters of ceaseless traffic... the remains of the natural world could only shrink before them. The pressure of numbers, the abundance of inventions, the blind forces of desires and needs, looked unstoppable and were generating a heat, a modern kind of heat” (125). This “hot breath of civilization,” indicating both widespread industrialization and also the voracious, panting appetites of so many inhabitants, is the crux—and the cause—of climate crisis.

Insofar as McEwan’s novel satirizes this crisis, especially through its sustained focus on Michael Beard’s selfish yet self-destructive qualities, it does so through recourse to a “realism that refuses the curative or restorative promises of science” (Matz 34).

There is a clear irony to the fact that Beard, a brilliant if lazy scientist, ultimately fails to implement any sort of progressive policies related to climate change. This is not due to his lack of knowledge or enthusiasm for his business venture (and it behooves us to bear in mind that this is very distinctly an entrepreneurial enterprise enabled by science, not a scientific undertaking which may accrue profits). In the end, Beard's much-touted Artificial Photosynthesis Plant, which should usher in a revolutionary new age in environmentally sound power production, does not open. This is not due to faulty science, but to the discovery that Beard has stolen Tom Aldous' work as his own—work that legally belongs to the Center at which Aldous was employed when he died. The unpleasant realities of Michael Beard's own character and comportment invalidate the “curative or restorative promises” of the climate science which has been at least partially enabled by his foundational work on the Beard-Einstein Conflation.

If the satirical realism of McEwan's novel exposes the impossibility of salving the wounds of the Earth with science, so too does it reject the reparative possibilities of political intervention. The issue occurs once again at the individual level but is rendered exponentially more problematic as apathy multiplies, takes root, and becomes the default position of an entire population with respect to the politics of environmental crisis. In the novel's first section, Michael Beard is described as a man who, on the topic of climate change, “read about it, vaguely deplored it, and expected governments to meet and take action” (17). He is not unique in this regard, expecting that large-scale structural changes will be effected by others, without his direct involvement or even perceptible commitment to the cause. As Matz puts it, “Politics suggests progress, and progress suggests correction. But satirical realism is the art of absolute disillusionment: it surveys the terrain that exists beyond correction” (33). Although it would be feasible for political progress to be made with regard to global warming, McEwan's particular brand of satirical realism disallows this possibility by critically dissecting human nature itself and

finding no cause for hope. As Michael Beard says in a fundraising speech for his solar energy enterprise, "...in a grave situation, a crisis, we understand, sometimes too late, that it is not in other people or in the system or in the nature of things that the problem lies, but in ourselves, our own follies" (179). But Michael Beard is the poster child for this tendency: thus his spectacular failure to recognize his own "follies" as the root of a broader systemic issue is not unique among the human species.

Solar's meditations on the collective failure of environmental stewardship are best summed up in its depiction of the "boot room" at the Arctic research station Beard visits. McEwan has discussed the inspiration for this passage, his own trip to Cape Farewell in the Arctic in 2005. In an essay entitled "A Boot Room in the Frozen North," McEwan reflects quite grandiosely on the descent of the boot room—a storage place for the participants' heavy winter gear—into utter chaos. Implicitly equating the boot room to the planet Earth, McEwan suggests that, "in the golden age of yesterday, the boot room had finite resources, equally shared—these were the initial conditions, the paradise we are about to lose, the conditions before the Fall we visitors are bound to re-enact" ("Boot Room"). The inevitable Fall from a state of egalitarian grace is caused by the competition for "resources" (i.e. properly sized snow suits) which leaves the room itself ravaged and disordered in the long term, as individual needs are prioritized to the exclusion of long-term environmental welfare. Beard reflects on this state of affairs in *Solar*, musing that humans are,

As a species, not the best imaginable, but certainly... the most interesting there was. But what about the general disgrace that was the boot room? Evidently a matter of human nature. And how were we ever going to learn about that? Science of course was fine, and who knew, art was too, but perhaps self-knowledge was beside the point. Boot rooms needed good systems so that flawed creatures could use them properly. Leave nothing, Beard decided, to science or art, or to idealism. Only good laws would save the boot room. And citizens who respected the laws. (93).

Beard himself basks in the "fondly forgiving, and self-forgiving" nature of these thoughts, illustrating again the temptation to outsource individual responsibility and

critical self-reflexivity to the abstract realm of politics, of “good laws” fashioned by governments. However, his statement actually does gesture toward the need for political mobilization with response to climate crisis. The question is whether or not science, art, or idealism can work against the entrenched aspects of human nature and move us toward political progress.

Solar suggests, repeatedly, that they cannot, because reality itself is presented as “an unchanging sphere of folly” (Matz 33). Even the closing section of the novel, though it raises the possibility of Beard’s interior transformation, might alternatively signify the climactic moment of his own self-destruction. Beard’s illegitimate daughter, whose birth he strongly opposed (arguing instead with his girlfriend for abortive measures) runs toward him in a diner. In this final moment of narration, “as Beard rose to greet her, he felt in his heart an unfamiliar swelling sensation, but he doubted as he opened his arms to her that anyone would ever believe him now if he tried to pass it off as love” (325). The “unfamiliar swelling sensation” Beard describes might well signify his developing ability to truly love—or admit his love for—his once-unwanted daughter Catriona. But it may also indicate a disastrous cardiac event, which would be particularly fitting given that it occurs in the midst of one of Beard’s epically gluttonous (and meticulously detailed) binges. Thus, even the novel’s final offering of a potential moment of selfless transformation is left decidedly ambiguous, tainted by the possibility that it might instead signify Beard’s death at his own greedy hands.

Solar portrays, in painstaking and personal detail, a world teetering on the brink of its own destruction: but as Aaron Matz clarifies, “to say that fiction can know the world is not to concede that it can correct it” (33). Fiction, science and politics *in* the novel prove inadequate to inspire sweeping change. *Solar*, as a satirical novel about climate crisis, therefore also gestures toward its own potential impotence. Its satire renders all too vivid the disastrous effects of our own planetary self-abuse, but as Michael

Beard shows us, awareness is not enough. It will only be when we are willing to treat the cancerous melanoma spreading across our collective body that climate change satire might engender a productively corrective laughter rather than a wry, resigned, hopeless death-rattle.

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