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Maughan, C.

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“Collective Unconsciousness: Climate Change and Responsibility in Ian McEwan’s Solar”

Author: Dr C J Maughan, Research Fellow, Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB. chris.maughan@coventry.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper makes links between issues of responsibility, climate change and contemporary literature, using Ian McEwan’s Solar as a case study. The paper addresses not only oversights in the existing critical responses to the novel, but identifies important insights that the novel can offer into a frontier of the politics of climate change: collective responsibility. Using and adapting Fredric Jameson’s theory of the ‘Political Unconscious’, the paper argues that many dominant conceptions about how to act on climate change (and other environmental problems) are based on patently outdated modes of political thought, especially those oriented around conceptions of individual responsibility. Using Jameson’s framework, this paper offers a way of reading beyond the failings of dominant modes of thinking to the anticipations of collective responsibility and action which exist in the margins of literary texts. By way of conclusion the paper offers some reflections on how an ecocriticism guided by such a reading strategy can inform the work of an experimental environmental activism.

Keywords: climate change; ecocriticism; responsibility; environmental political theory.
1. Introduction

Who do we blame for climate change? And whose responsibility is it to fix it?

In certain respects, considerations of blame and responsibility might seem natural in discussions about climate change. After all, climate change is certainly among the most pressing challenges we face as a species: it is already thought to cause around 400,000 human deaths a year (DARA and Climate Vulnerable Forum 2012, 17), to be doing irreversible damage to vital ecosystems, such as coral reefs (Speers et al. 2016), and may, of course, lead to the extinction of the human race (Morgan 2009) (as well as countless other non-human species (IPPC 2015, 13)). In certain other respects, however, considerations of responsibility are fiendishly difficult to reconcile with the sheer scale of climate change. Climate change is not an event which can be easily mapped in time or space, its effects are numerous and (still) poorly understood, and take a long and (often) indeterminate amount of time to register themselves. For example, how do we attribute responsibility for emissions accrued over a 250 year period (IPPC 2015, 4), especially when many of those involved will soon be (or are already) dead? Climate change is also much more than simply a material phenomenon, it is messily entangled with the ideas, cultures, and manifold irrationalities which make up our human and non-human worlds. Far from being a graspable and containable problem, it is no less than the material and social condition of the entire world, the culmination of millennia of human (and non-human) activity.

In an attempt to address this apparent impasse, this paper makes links between issues of responsibility, climate change and contemporary literature, using Ian McEwan’s novel, Solar (2010) as a case study. The paper addresses not only
oversights in the existing critical responses to the novel, but identifies important insights that the novel can offer into a frontier of the politics of climate change: collective responsibility. Using and adapting Fredric Jameson’s (1989) theory of the ‘Political Unconscious’, the paper argues that many dominant conceptions about how to act on climate change (and other environmental problems) are based on patently outdated modes of political thought, especially those oriented around conceptions of individual responsibility. Using Jameson’s framework, this paper offers a way of reading beyond the failings of dominant modes of thinking to the anticipations of collective responsibility and action which exist in the margins of literary texts.

Literary theorists have repeatedly noted the challenges presented by climate change’s unprecedented spatio-temporal scales. Timothy Morton’s (Morton 2010) concept of the ‘hyperobject’, for example, frames climate change as something we are always ‘inside’, and which we therefore struggle to engage with. Similarly, Rob Nixon (Nixon 2011, 2) argues that it is precisely climate change’s creeping invisibility – its ‘slow violence’ – which ‘hinder[s] our efforts to mobilize and act decisively’ against it. Despite this, strategies focused on the attribution of personal responsibility still play a major role in conversation about climate change, from ‘grassroots’ campaigns to more ‘top-down’ initiatives. Invoking Judith Butler’s idea of ‘responsibilitization’, Mark Fisher (Fisher 2009, 70) notes the problem of emphasising individual responsibility within climate change’s systemic vastness: ‘Instead of saying that everyone – i.e. every one – is responsible for climate change, we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that’s the very problem’. The challenge, as Butler (Butler 2009, 13) herself refers to it, is ‘to rethink and reformulate a conception of global responsibility’ in order to create conditions for a collective response as yet not manifest or obvious.
In this article, I look at *Solar* as an exemplum of the tensions which abound in thinking about climate change and responsibility. Unlike almost all of the novel’s critics, however, I draw a number of valuable lessons from the novel. Indeed, not only does the plot of *Solar* play out key dynamics in thinking about how blame is routinely apportioned in climate change discourse, but, interestingly, these same dynamics have also played out in the novel’s critical reception. Typically, critics of the novel have called McEwan to task for, as Richard Kerridge (2010, 160) puts it, failing to ‘imagin[e] for us […] in artistic form, the feelings we do not yet dare to have’. Using and adapting Jameson’s ‘political unconscious’, I contend that such expectations are unrealistic; rarely has literature been able to offer, what Thoerdor Adorno (qtd. in Jameson, 2004: 51), calls, a ‘positive representation of an emancipated society’, without, as McEwan himself puts it, ‘falling flat with moral intent’ (qtd. in (RealClimate and Network 2010)). *Solar*, like climate change, cannot be understood in straightforwardly didactic terms. That said, if read using Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious, one can begin to approach what cannot be grasped directly; that is, the fatal flaws of our current thinking and glimpses of what will (or must) come later – in short, a politics of *collective* rather than *individual* responsibility.

2. Jameson and ‘the political unconscious’

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson (1989, 17) argues for ‘the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts […] not as an optional auxiliary to other
interpretative methods [...] but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and of all interpretation'. Jameson’s interest in this regard is not merely the overt ways in which literary material sometimes addresses political issues, but instead its indirect or ‘unconscious’ registration of political dynamics. Jameson’s work allows us to move away from worrying about what McEwan (or indeed any other author) allegedly intended, to emphasising the importance of the act of reading in uncovering the vast unconscious which the literary structure makes accessible to us. ‘The literary structure’, he tells us,

far from being completely realized on any one of its levels tilts powerfully into the underside or impense or non-dit, in short, into the very political unconscious, of the text, such that the latter's dispersed semes [...] themselves then insistently direct us to the informing power of forces or contradictions which the text seeks in vain wholly to control or master.

(Jameson 1989, 49)

While, as Jameson suggests, texts will always struggle ‘in vain’ to contain their contradictions, the actual process of uncovering them is far from straightforward, particularly given the strength of the forces complicit in their concealment. As Jameson sees it, our social and political worlds form a complex web, ‘crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once’ (Jameson 1989, 95). While this complexity is important to acknowledge for political reasons, this also clearly presents problems to anyone attempting to understand the world, especially, as we have seen, with something as multi-scalar and multi-temporal as climate change. Jameson’s method for navigating such a complex landscape is to outline what he calls ‘a series of enlarging theoretical
horizons’ that, in three stages, guide the analysis ‘toward one particular order of
textual phenomena’ (Jameson 1989, 91, 71). Such an approach achieves the ideal
situation, as Jameson (1989, 45) puts it, of helping us to ‘break the reifying habit of
thinking of a given narrative as an object, or as a unified whole, or as a static
structure’.

The analysis that follows reproduces Jameson’s (1989, 102) approach by
rehearsing a general movement of these analytical horizons, from individual text as a
‘series of events in time’ to the ‘untranscendable horizon’ of the text’s historical
production. A fuller description of these horizons and how they intersect is given as
part of the readings themselves; however, by way of a basic overview they can be
understood to focalise interactions at the level of i) the individual, ii) social relations,
and finally iii) historical production. Such a framework, I argue, is essential for
guiding readers through the complexity of our world, and, moreover, in constructing
an apprehension of climate change not ‘as an object’ or as a ‘static structure’, but as
a complex process apprehendable only at all three of these ‘horizons’.

Jameson’s political unconscious invites us, therefore, to challenge the habits
of cognition that result in simplistic understandings of climate change, ones which
end up misattributing ‘blame’ at the individual level or even denying its existence
altogether. Jameson’s approach does this, not by showcasing particular texts as
exemplars of an ideal vision of the world, but by reading beyond their surfaces, to
their silences and contradictions (as well as their utopian implications).

Contemporary narratives of all kinds (not just those explicitly about climate change)
can similarly be read as, in Jameson’s words, ‘mythic resolutions of issues’ — like
climate change — ‘that [we] are unable to articulate conceptually’ (Jameson 1989,
79).
In sum, a thoroughgoing, multi-levelled analysis such as the one outlined by Jameson is utterly essential in an understanding a problem like climate change, especially if such a project is to be brought into the realm of representational and cultural theory. If climate change, as a phenomenon occurring within history and bound up with social and economic relations, currently evades representation in the ways Morton and Nixon have suggested, one option is to look at how it is already mis-represented ‘in textual form’; that is, how the text conceals the ‘informing power of forces or contradictions’ which underlie climate change. The end result will offer readings finally commensurate with climate change itself, which through its sheer existence demands a change in how we look at the world.

Before I move on to put this approach into action, I turn first to note the way in which Solar’s critical reception has appeared to reproduce a politics of climate change definitively counter to this view; that is, one focused on the directly symbolic implications of the central character’s ‘personal responsibility’.


Ian McEwan’s Solar tells the story of Michael Beard, a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics who finds himself at the forefront of the British attempt to identify technological solutions to the intertwined crises of energy and the environment. Despite his first-class education and prestigious profile, Beard’s inner world is one of emotional turmoil and moral disarray. The story begins with Beard distracted from his duties as head of the ‘National Centre for Renewable Energy’ amidst the breakdown of his fifth marriage. As Beard is drawn into a vortex of jealousy, petty revenge, lust and self-loathing generated by this situation, he is shocked to discover that his wife, Patrice, is having an affair with one of his research assistants, Tom Aldous. Following
a brief but non-violent confrontation, during which Aldous attempts to confide in Beard that he is on the verge of a solar energy breakthrough, Aldous accidentally slips and falls, hitting his head on a coffee table. He is killed instantly. Realising he will almost certainly be accused of Aldous’ murder, Beard decides to flee the scene, though not before planting evidence which would incriminate another of his wife’s lovers, Rodney Tarpin. With a sound alibi of his own, Beard is never a serious suspect, and Tarpin goes down for the murder having already aroused police suspicion through previous violent conduct. Shortly after the episode, Beard discovers papers addressed to him from Aldous detailing the plans for a new type of solar panel. The rest of the novel is split into two time periods (2005 and 2009) during which we learn that Beard has set up a business, with the intent to develop the Aldous’ plans, pass them off as his own, and exploit them on the international market.

4. **Solar’s critical reception**

Literary-critical responses to *Solar* have been slow to emerge. In their 2011 review of ‘literature and climate change’, Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra (2011, 192) noted a lack of scholarship on the novel, though suggested that *Solar* ‘will almost certainly be the focus of much research’ over the coming years. At the time of writing, however, there remain only a handful of serious critical engagements with the novel, almost all of which have attempted to draw-out straightforward allegorical readings relating to the behaviour of the central character, Michael Beard. Ilany Kogan (2012, 1311), for example, suggests the novel gives us ‘the opportunity to be in touch with human frailties, which, alas, reside in us all’; similarly, Patrick Murphy (2014, 150), notes the novel’s ‘pessimistic attitude about human behavior’; and Eva
Zemanek (2012, 52), who recommends Solar’s usefulness in thinking about ‘risk’, a point she demonstrates by drawing parallels between ‘the risks [Beard] is taking in his private life’ and the risks we are taking collectively with climate change. Overwhelmingly critics have also rejected the novel on this basis. As Graham Huggan (2015, 87) suggests, Solar has been ‘picked on, with some justification, as a misfiring satirical take on the bad “issues novel”’ [emphasis added]. These readings, I argue, depend upon a particularly limited vision of what allegory is or could do, and certainly preclude the possibility of readings that go beyond the simple parameters set up by the allegory. I return to this crucial concept in more detail in the section entitled ‘Social Horizon’, as well as in the concluding paragraphs of this article.

By far the most developed critical engagements with Solar have come from Greg Garrard. In a surprising turn, Garrard wrote what Johns-Putra and Trexler (2011, 192) described as ‘a playful engagement with the novel, analyzing it before it was published’. Using the development towards what he saw as ‘the notion of human nature’ across McEwan’s career to date, Garrard (2009, 696) claimed to be able to extrapolate how McEwan would engage with climate change in Solar. Such a move, suggested Garrard, might permit ‘a way around the formal obstacles to writing a novel about climate change’, which had, he said, been bound up in the opposing poles of ‘fatalism’ or ‘idealism’ (2009, 718). As fuel to this hypothesis, Garrard referred to statements made by McEwan himself, who, ahead of the novel’s publication, suggested that

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 [...] I couldn't quite see how a novel would work without falling flat with moral intent (qtd. in (RealClimate and Network 2010)).

Buoyed by these comments, Garrard goes on to suggest that Solar ‘may well provoke a fundamental shift in ecocritical assumptions [...] to an anti-essentialist Darwinism’ (Garrard 2009, 718). Such a novel, Garrard dared to hope, would be capable of disabusing us of an essentialist ‘human nature’, one corroborated and consolidated over the long history of the European novel. McEwan’s treatment would, Garrard claimed, be able to deconstruct this position and offer up something commensurate with the global scale of the problem.

In his following publications on Solar, however, Garrard has been unable to conceal his disappointment. Garrard’s main grievance, it seems, is with McEwan’s choice of form, which he sees as instrumental in limiting the potential of the novel to ‘to give climate projections a moral salience they otherwise lack, and, by extension, encourage us to see carbon emissions as damnable rather than foolish’ (Garrard 2013, 178). On the contrary, argues Garrard, Solar draws up a cruelly comic analogy between physical weight and carbon emissions that implies both obesity and global warming are failures of self-discipline – a convenient untruth that exonerates the fast food and fast fuel industries. [...] Yet the analogy of obesity to carbon emissions is inexact, and the representation of both forms of ‘excess’ as failures of individual resolve is deeply misleading. (Garrard 2013, 181–82)

Garrard’s response is surprising, not only in terms of how he understands McEwan’s literary project, but also, I would argue, in terms of what Garrard envisages to be
literature’s general function vis-a-vis a problem like climate change. Firstly, as I will go on to argue, it is quite possible to use the presentation of Beard’s ‘immoral’ character to problematise ideas of an ‘essentialist’ human nature, consistent with the way Garrard had originally envisaged. In his 2009 article, for example, Garrard (718) claimed that ‘the work of fiction is to wonder at our human variety and commonality, it seems, not to seek to reform it’ (Garrard 2009, 718). Secondly, in his 2013 article Garrard reminds us that ‘Ecocriticism is not the literary critical department of the IPCC. [...] Climate has deep meanings in every culture that cannot simply be over-ridden by a mass of climatological data’ (Garrard 2013, 186). Despite these comments, however, Garrard appears to want Solar to deliver solutions to climate change in a relatively straightforward manner. This is, as McEwan himself had suggested, not what Solar could possibly do (especially given its formal constraints), at least, not without ‘falling flat with moral intent’. Neither is it how we should view literature in this instance.

What is offered below is a reading which acknowledges the surface level implications of Beard’s behaviour, but which goes beyond these in order to explore the ideological dynamics which structure them. In other words, despite Solar’s recapitulation of what Buell (1998, 663) calls ‘the traditional protocols of protagonist-centred fiction’, we can still go ‘beyond’ Beard – that is, into what Jameson calls ‘the underside or [...] the very political unconscious, of the text’.

**The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon**

In line with the three horizons envisaged by Jameson, my reading begins at the surface level. The first horizon, Jameson explains, reflects ‘the narrow sense of
punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time’ and ‘the passionate immediacy of struggles between historical individuals’ (Jameson 1989, 75). This, according to Jameson is a reasonably straightforward process – the ‘ordinary explication de texte’ – in which the text and its narrative are understood as ‘a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm’ (Jameson 1989, 79).

Such a process, argues Jameson, is particularly important for grasping the way in which all cultural artefacts approach issues ‘insurmountable in their own terms’ and as ‘mythic resolutions of issues that they are unable to articulate conceptually’.

(Jameson 1989, 79) Seen from this perspective, Solar is indeed preoccupied by the exploits of a deeply uncaring, selfish and troubled individual; against the backdrop of a global concern like climate change these characteristics are thrown into even sharper relief, and in ways which appear to fatally undercut any hope that such individuals might readily adopt more environmentally sound modes of thinking and acting. Indeed, climate change itself is often only a ‘background’ concern for Beard.

Throughout the novel’s first section (entitled ‘2000’) – bar some minor incidental details (such as Beard’s appointment at the National Centre for Renewable Energy, and his dealings with Aldous) – we mostly bear witness to Beard’s fevered introspections. In one rare ‘worldly’ reflection Beard intimates that, for him, climate change 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. (15-16 [emphasis added]).

If there is a chief reason for Beard’s indifference, then it is quite simply because ‘he
himself had other things to think about’. Beard surveys the accumulating inventory of
potential calamity without concern, from the coldly scientific perspective of the
‘molecule of carbon dioxide’. There is no space in Beard’s appraisal for emotion or
socialised sensibility to what climate change might mean to others. Up to a certain
point, the justification given for Beard’s view is an otherwise healthy scepticism,
calling out humankind’s myopia for believing itself to be ‘always living at the end of
days, that one’s own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world’ (16).
But Beard’s apparent rationalism masks a stridently narrow individualism; the ‘other
things to think about’ are no more profound than where the next shot of whisky, bout
of intercourse, or deep-fried snack will come from. Beard is indeed, the paragon of
the modern, liberal individual subject, a hard exterior concealing an interior in
emotional chaos: ‘he was self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his mind a cluster of
appetites and dreamy thoughts’ (169). Despite being self-consciously individualistic,
Beard utterly fails to stay in control of himself, or, rather the competing versions of
himself. In perhaps the best example of this (indeed, in a moment which, for Garrard,
undoes the whole novel), awaking after a heavy night’s drinking, Beard, ‘began to
form the familiar resolution, then dismissed it, for he knew he was no match for that
late-morning version of himself, for example, en route from Berlin, reclining in the
sunlit cabin, a gin and tonic to hand’ (184). Beard is not simply a victim of his own
appetites, but rather a schizoid composite of rational calculation and powerful
libidinousness; Beard’s inner life becomes vicissitudinous in the extreme, vacillating
between existential crisis and consumerist coma.
Where Beard is single minded is in the pursuit of profit. His so-called ‘mission’ to get the solar panel project off the ground, for example, turns out to be little more than a thinly-veiled money-making scheme. Beard addresses investors on the subject of climate change for an ‘unnaturally inflated fee’ but also because if, as a result, he manages to sell one or two panels ‘even by the smallest of fractions, his own company must benefit’ (112). So much is Beard’s pursuit of profit a blind compulsion, in fact, that when he encounters difficulties and attempts to play the victim, we can only wonder at his audacity:

He did not deserve these distractions. They were encircling him, women, an Albuquerque lawyer, a north-London criminal, the unquiet cells of his own body, in a conspiracy to prevent him making his gift to the world. None of this was his fault. People had said of him that he was brilliant, and that was right, he was a brilliant man trying to do good. Self-pity steadied him a little (236-7).

Through moments such as these, we get an impression of the extent of Beard’s self-delusion. Indeed, the sheer repressive effort manifests in more than merely psychological ways. As with Beard’s psychological, relationship and financial problems, his bodily ailments are listed for us in gratuitous and morbid detail:

Pathogens swam in hordes across the moat of his defences, they swarmed over the castle walls armed with cold sores, mouth ulcers, fatigue, joint pain, watery bowels, nose acne, blepharitis – a new one this, a disfiguring inflammation of the eyelids that erupted into white-peaked Mount Fuji styes
that pressured his eyeballs, blurring his vision. Insomnia and monomania also distorted his view (22).

While important for the development of Beard’s character, we must not forget, as Jameson suggests, that such details are ‘symbolic’, a means by which ‘real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm’ (Jameson 1989, 79). In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004, 304), Jameson’s theoretical precursor for the concept of ‘horizons’, ‘[to] acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion’. In Jameson’s second ‘horizon’, then, we apprehend this ‘larger whole’ by viewing Solar as one utterance within ‘the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes’. Solar’s social relations are at root antagonistic; that is, as Jameson understands it, ‘two opposing discourses [fighting] it out within the general unity of a shared code’ (Jameson 1989, 84). Seen from this perspective, Beard’s actions can be seen beyond the ‘chronicle-like’ drama of the text, as utterances which take part in (and influence) larger process; namely, patterns of social relations.

The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon

At the level of social relations, one must concede that Solar is clearly conducive to a number of allegorical readings. As Zemanek (2012, 56) suggests, Beard’s story ‘in its entirety constitute[s] an allegory’ of climate change; however,
within this horizon should also be included the broader discursive tensions and antagonisms relating to class or other forms of social inequality. *Solar* is brimming with details like this – of Beard’s class hypocrisy, his sexism, and consumerist apathy. These types of problematic relations are indeed what most readers of *Solar* (including Garrard) have focussed on, and there is a lot of mileage in them. Conversely, what I argue here is that, while allegory is useful for identifying certain social tensions and contradictions reflected by the novel, it should not be where we end our analysis. Indeed, not only does *Solar*’s allegory ultimately collapse under its own telegraphed absurdity, but using Jameson’s horizons, it is possible to look beyond this collapse to another horizon, that of the text’s historical production.

This is perhaps the most contentious move in the procedure I outline here, for it involves first demonstrating how *Solar* works as an allegory of antagonistic discourses before moving on to demonstrate the significance of its allegory’s fatal limitations. It is compelling, for instance, to note the structural similarities between Beard’s positionality as a privileged white man and mainstream collective inaction on climate change. Indeed, consistent with allegory, this appears to iterate into the smallest details of the events described. Consider, for example, the breakdown of Beard’s fifth marriage, which might be read as an exercise in *how not to act during a crisis*. When Beard discovers a note from his wife informing him with cruel honesty that she is ‘staying over’ at her lover’s house that night, Beard entertains going ‘round to the mock-Tudor ex-council semi [...] to mash the man’s brains with his own monkey wrench’ (5). Those acquainted with environmentalist literature might be reminded here of Edward Abbey’s full-blooded depiction of environmental activism, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), but, if so, that is as far as the comparison goes. As we have already heard, Beard’s impulse to act is only momentary; instead, he
simply ‘watched television for five hours’ (5), trying, and failing, to distract himself with alcohol.

When Beard does act, he often does so in an extremely childish way. In a particularly farcical display, Beard pretends to have an extra-marital lover of his own, creating sounds designed to convince his estranged wife that there is someone in his room with him, using the TV to approximate voices, laughing periodically to non-existent jokes and even using his hands to simulate the sound of two sets of feet on the stairs. ‘This was the kind of logical plan’, we are told ‘only a madman might embrace’ (10). When Beard sees a bruise on Patrice’s face he again contemplates action, ‘lingering on the detail of his right fist bursting through the cartilage of Tarpin’s nose’. The idea does not, however, develop beyond the realm of fantasy, as ‘with minor revisions, he reconsidered the scene through closed eyes, and did not stir until the following morning’ (14). Episodes like this neatly lampoon the worst kind of behaviours associated with climate change, from straightforward inaction, fantasy, self-deprecation, to (in the case of Beard’s fictitious lover) ‘politics as simulation’, analogues of which have come to prominence within analyses of climate change policy (Clark 2010, 141). Given the context of the novel (i.e. climate change), even episodes as apparently trivial as this can easily be recast in light of patterns of social relations.

These episodes also set us up for the rest of the novel within which we encounter numerous other domestic and personal foibles which become difficult to dissociate from the broader topic of the social relations which lie behind action and discourse on climate change. For example, Beard’s uneven slovenliness (despite having an obscenely untidy flat, he is ‘clean about his person, vain about his clothes’ (163)); his avoidance of his own accumulating bodily disorders, despite overwhelming evidence; his imperviousness in the face of huge changes in his life,
like the birth of his daughter; and his vast appetite for food and alcohol, while in full awareness of its detrimental effect on his physical and emotional wellbeing. The resemblance of Beard’s personal foibles to the problems of climate change is more than merely schematic, there are also linguistic resonances. As if in some kind of pathetic fallacy, the ‘sickness’ of the planet begins to manifest in spectacular sympathy on Beards body. This phenomenon is best demonstrated in a passage already quoted, which takes on new significance when considered in the wider environmental and social context. Beard lists his ailments, including a condition called ‘blepharitis’, which, as we have already heard, ‘erupted into white-peaked Mount Fuji styes’ (22). Similarly, just before Beard gives his speech to investors he undergoes an untimely bout of food poisoning, during which he felt an oily nausea at something monstrous and rotten from the sea, stranded on the tidal mud flats of a stagnant estuary, decaying gaseously in his gut and welling up, contaminating his breath, his words and, suddenly, his thoughts.

“The planet,” he said, surprising himself, “is sick.” (148)

The echo of environmental despoilment in both these examples is striking, bringing a bodily-scale to a global phenomenon. Similarly, Beard’s neglected flat, which he imagines as ‘a parallel civilisation, invisible and mute, successful living entities […] would have long settled to their specialised feasts, and when the fuel ran out, they would dry to a smear of charcoal dust’ (110). The descriptions of climate change and personal foibles become intricately and ineluctably intertwined, often sitting side-by-side in mutual reinforcement. Indications appear, in fact, that Beard himself has
begun to notice these resonances: “Don’t be a denier”, Doctor Parks had said, appearing to refer back to their climate-change chats’ (238).

As Zemanek has noted, the allegories stack up to such an extent as to create a ‘hall of mirrors’ effect (2012, 56). This happens so much, in fact, that we begin to understand climate change through Beard’s ailments, foibles, and failed diets, rather than the other way around. At one point Beard describes a carbon trading scheme that might permit a ‘coal-burning company’ to ‘rightfully claim that its operations were carbon neutral’ (187). While this could easily be seen as little more than a clever inversion calculated to entertain, it is, I argue, of crucial significance for any attempt to move beyond the surface level of the text, to the social, and later historical horizons. Whereas we might begin reading Solar unable to avoid reading Beard’s personal life in light of the politics of climate change, the situation has now reversed. It is now carbon trading that we understand in terms of self-delusion, as an imprint of our essential ‘human frailty’. What are we to make of this allegorical ‘hall of mirrors’ vis-à-vis a reading of Solar’s environmental politics? Are we, as Garrard argues, to take it as an ‘essentialist’ (and defeatist) statement about human incapacity? The proposition, I argue, is absurd, and neatly demonstrates the logical breakdown of the allegorical connection between personal responsibility and global climate change. Indeed, that we should read personal actions in terms of climate change is one thing, that we should do the opposite is quite another, like trying to understand a ‘crime’ without considering social and historical context. What such readings reveal is not the de facto stability of such allegorical readings, but their patent instability, their absurd inversion of cause and effect. To take them at face value would be to ascent to the view that individuals create structures, rather than the other way around. Far from being a natural or ‘essential’ liberal individual, Beard appears more and more as a paper-thin construct. If we have in view social relations rather than the isolated
individual, then the absurd idea that climate change is somehow a function of our 'nature' begins to collapse.

While Jameson’s theory offers a framework supple enough to elucidate the forbidding complexity of world-historical processes, this does not negate McEwan’s own skilled handling of his material. Indeed, his ironic deployment of allegory provides useful – and more to the point *enjoyable* – cues to the deeper, structural processes which Jameson attempts to synthesise. Note, for example, the hints of chivalric language in some of the quotes already described – the pathogens which swarm ‘in hordes across the moat of his defences [...] over the castle walls armed with cold sores’, or Beard’s own farcical attempts to assail Turpin’s ‘mock-Tudor ex-council semi’, bringing to mind a time-travelling Don Quixote stumbling his way through modern day residential landscapes.

These ironic resonances of one of allegory’s archetypal features – the proverbial ‘knight in shining armour’ – aren’t simply there for ornamentation, but signpost a gentle mocking of the genre, and McEwan’s intent to go beyond the fatal limitations of seeing allegory, as C.S. Lewis (qtd. Owens 2008, xxii) describes it, ‘as a cryptogram, existing only to be decoded’. Instead, as Lewis continues, we should see it as a way of ‘moving always into the book, not out of it’. As Jameson’s theory suggests, our readings should not resolve themselves at the social horizon (though this is exactly where many critics of the novel have ended their analysis). Instead, as with climate change, the compulsion to see Beard’s character as the cause rather than the symptom of a systemic flaw can only be surmounted by pushing the analysis to a wider ‘horizon’. Such an idea demands an analysis at the level of what Jameson calls the ‘mode of production’, which here I take to mean the current set of social and economic arrangements understood as the culmination of a vast historical process. Seen from this perspective – as I will go on to argue below – Beard is no
longer irredeemably entangled in antagonistic social relations, but, instead, can be seen as part of a dialectical structure, one which moves precisely because of its contradictions.

The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon

By moving out into the third horizon, the idea is to consider texts in ‘the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole’ as ‘the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production’ (Jameson 1989, 76). In the context of *Solar*, this refers to the contemporary setting of the novel in both its discursive and material forms, but seen as the ‘end product’ of a totalising historical process. It is by making this move that ‘essentialist’ (and politically defeatist) textual features can be deconstructed most effectively.

By positioning Beard in the ‘untranscendable horizon’ of history, rather than as a representative of an immovable and ‘essentialised human nature’, one is first able to grasp his role within a historical contestation at the level of a contingent and mutable ideology. In short, Beard’s antagonism is changeable, his position not one of ahistorical ‘essence’ but of the adversarial (and highly unstable) forces of the ‘dominant’ and ‘emergent’ (to borrow Raymond Williams’ (2009, 121–27) famous terminology). Using this figure, Beard’s position may well appear ‘dominant’ now, but could easily become displaced by ‘emergent’ forces stemming from uniquely contemporary circumstances, rendering his position ‘residual’ or irrelevant. *Solar’s* ‘utopian impulse’, if one can call it this, is buried beneath the (admittedly distracting) surface of Beard’s moral turpitude. By looking beyond this façade, however, one not
only sees more clearly the mobilisation of ‘emergent’ forms (i.e. those forming in response to a world in the midst of environmental catastrophe), but also the usefulness of the political unconscious: they are – appropriately for emergent forms – at the periphery or ‘underside’ of the novel’s plot; Beard’s own ‘dominant’ position manifests with increasing incoherence, attested by his comic foibes and desperate incoherence.

Beard’s dominance is signalled via a cluster of features befitting his identity position (i.e. white, straight, male), his economic class (i.e. upper-middle, Oxford educated, affluent), but, most importantly of all, in the novel’s very structure; that is, via the ‘the traditional protocols of protagonist-centred fiction’. Each simultaneously confirms Beard’s ‘dominant’ position, though arguably, too, the inevitability of his demise. He is, as we have seen, utterly atomised: ‘self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his mind a cluster of appetites and dreamy thoughts’, but in such a way which leaves him stranded emotionally and politically, for ‘like many clever men who prize objectivity, he was a solipsist at heart, and in his heart was a nugget of ice’ (169).

Beard is irredeemable, as a ‘childless man at a certain age at the end of his fifth marriage could afford a touch of nihilism’ (75), and yet he is simultaneously able to acknowledge that any solution to climate change requires us to step beyond the individualism he embodies: during his speech to investors, he remarks ‘Virtue is too passive, too narrow. Virtue can motivate individuals, but for groups, societies, a whole civilisation, it’s a weak force’ (149).

The speech is perhaps the best example in the book of Beard’s desperate incoherence, dressed up in the clothes of sense. Interestingly, in his review of the novel, climate scientist, Stefan Rahmstorf, even went as far as to call it a ‘riveting speech’, one that he would be ‘tempted to steal and use verbatim myself at some occasion’ (RealClimate and Network 2010). As we have already seen, Beard is on
the verge of bodily and mental breakdown throughout the speech; his value system, too, is equally on the verge of collapse. Though Beard points to the obvious need to move away from individual thinking, recommending what he calls ‘the pleasures of ingenuity and co-operation’ (149), he concludes ‘that 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 and unexamined assumptions’ (155). As we discover, the remarks are not part of a coherent world-view but merely the first thing that came into his head to say as ‘he hurried towards his conclusion’: ‘Were his points somewhat forced, or had he stumbled upon two important truths? No time to consider’ (155).

As well as providing an entertaining farce, Beard’s incoherence is contingent on the contradictory objectives which have been set for him in the speech; that is, to find a way for a dominant economic and political class to both participate in the revolutionary overturning of their mode of production while miraculously retaining a grip on power. Beard’s aim, in other words, appears to be to encourage the progenitors of inequality and industrial-scale environmental ruin to be both ‘part of the process’ and ‘make very large sums of money, staggering sums’ by precipitating ‘another industrial revolution’ (148). Indeed, the reference to ‘another industrial revolution’ is where Beard’s proposal is most nakedly contradictory, citing as it does a period in history during which the current dominance of the capitalist classes was secured, and the environmentally destructive project of industrialisation set in motion. Beard’s role is to dress up the reproduction of power in the rhetoric of revolution; it is this fatal contradiction which Beard’s character comes to embody.

Many commentators have come to identify climate change as symptomatic of the limitations of the current mode of production. This is no less true in Solar, where, in Beard’s words, climate change involves the search for a ‘new energy source for
the whole of civilisation’ (34). Yet Beard’s attempts to cash in on solar energy are indicative of the contradictions at the heart of his attempt as a ‘dominant’ to retain power in the transition to a new mode of production, without considerations of the new political forms (including ideas of collective responsibility) which must accompany this. When Beard encounters difficulties in realising his plan, he (of course) overlooks these contradictions. Instead he imagines a ‘conspiracy’ (236), or and blames the ‘sclerotic’ markets (205) for impeding his attempts to give ‘his gift to the world’ (236). By now it is obvious that Beard’s difficulties can be traced to his failure to identify a politically appropriate strategy for rolling out a solar energy project.

In renewable energy discourses, solar energy has enjoyed a number of positive associations, promising not only a clean energy source, but also an opportunity to decentralise control of energy generation to the advantage of local communities (Kunze and Becker 2015). Though there are certainly those who contest the logistics of this (e.g. MacKay 2010), solar power’s symbolic status as an ‘energy commons’ remains formidable, as demonstrated by cultural and political phenomena like ‘solarpunk’ (Hamilton 2017) and the still sizeable number solar cooperatives in operation today (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. 2018). As such, Beard’s attempt to patent solar energy must be seen as a jarring attempt to enclose an emblematic energy commons within a regime of industrial-scale capital accumulation. Moreover, Beard’s plan is incoherent within both dominant and emergent-collective economic paradigms. Again, the problem is best captured in Beard’s own words. During a speech to mark the unveiling of the project, Beard – with galling false modesty – claims that ‘I can claim nothing for myself. I stood, like Newton, on the shoulders of giants’ (249), even going on to add that he ‘borrowed slavishly from nature [...] by imitating photosynthesis’ (249-50). Beard thus describes
the project not only as a historical ‘inevitability’, but in terms of a common heritage, promising ‘we will have clean energy, endlessly self-renewing, and we can begin to draw back from the brink of disastrous, self-destructive global warming’ (250).

However, Beard’s claims here prove to be the exact opposite of how the solar project is actually rolled out. Beard has not only stolen the idea from Aldous, but is desperately trying to ensure no one but him benefits financially from it – ‘his thoughts turned obsessively, uselessly around the project. He held seventeen patents in the panels’ (230). Neither is Beard motivated by a desire to save the planet. In order to generate the kind of financial (and political) buy-in necessary to kick-start his business – which Beard alone hopes to profit from using his patents – the planet must first reach near oblivion. When Beard’s associate begins to doubt the viability of the scheme due to reports that ‘the scientists have gotten it wrong’ about climate change (215), Beard gleefully reassures him that ‘The UN estimates that already a third of a million people a year are dying from climate change. [...] It’s a catastrophe. Relax!’ (217).

Far from being an indication of some universal truth about ‘human nature’, Beard’s character flaws show ‘dominant’ modes of thought and production to be both constructed and redundant – especially in the ideological context of liberal individualism. Beard, we are told, ‘does not believe in inner change only slow inner and outer decay’ (66). The unravelling of Beard’s personal life – concretised in his turbulent love affairs, aggrieved family, the wrongly imprisoned Tarpin, and unpaid debts – invites us to see the anachronism of the way he thinks, embodying a dangerously outdated mode of production in personal foibles. This reading is in stark contrast to, for example, Garrard’s concerns over the ‘the representation of both forms of “excess” as failures of individual resolve’ (Garrard 2013, 182).
But if Beard is the embodiment of a mode of production on the verge of collapse, where are the viable alternatives, or, as Jameson would put it, the ‘anticipations of modes of production’? For an answer, we must return to the political unconscious: alternatives to Beard’s doomed thinking occur in the background to Beard’s emblematically ‘dominant’ modes of thought and action. Nonetheless, the peripheral alternatives represent the hope – the ‘utopian impulse’ – within the ‘emergent’ forces of anticipated modes of production. These concern behaviours conspicuous at odds with ones we associate with Beard, such as emotional sensitivity, openness, honesty, collective ownership, loyalty, forgiveness, and generosity. The literary corollary then to a contestation of an ideology of ‘responsibilitization’ comes through a deconstruction of the idea that the central protagonist is the key site of change. We must ‘look beyond’ Beard, as Gadamer would put it, to change happening at the periphery, in the text’s emergent and collective forms.

Perhaps the most straightforward example is Beard’s daughter, Catriona. She is described as having an extreme degree of ‘emotional delicacy’, even, we are told, to the point of ‘experienc[ing] another mind as a tangible force field, whose waves were overwhelming, like Atlantic breakers’ (220). Alongside Beard’s own emotional deficiency, Catriona’s experience offers a telling counterpoint. Similarly, Beard’s lover, Melissa, whose love and commitment to him he understands as ‘a flaw in her character’, the product of a ‘delusion’ (159). Beard, by contrast, was ‘pleased that he himself had never fallen properly in love’ (257).

Beard does not always fail to recognise ‘emergent’ behaviours when he sees them, though is condemned only to glimpse them momentarily, or uselessly after the fact. In perhaps the book’s most famous passage Beard becomes what McEwan calls an ‘unwitting thief’ (157). The episode concerns Beard’s silent confrontation with
a man on the train who he assumes is eating his packet of crisps. Readers are led to believe that indeed the man sitting across from Beard is openly stealing his food, only to discover later that they indeed belonged to the other man. After discovering his error Beard stood so completely revealed to himself, a naked fool, that he felt purified and redeemed, like a penitent, like an elated medieval flagellant with a newly flayed back. That poor fellow whose food and drink you devoured, who offered you his last morsels, fetched down your luggage, was a friend to man. No, no, that was not for now, the agony of retrospection must be postponed (127).

Beard grasps very well the other man’s vast tolerance and magnanimity – in stark contrast to his own brutish and petty behaviour. Yet in the same moment he ‘postpones’ any serious self-analysis.

Lastly, and most importantly, Tom Aldous – the man whose accidental death Beard frames Tarpin for, and from whom he ultimately steals the designs for the revolutionary solar panels. Aldous’ character is a representative of a contrasting faith in the possibility of a collective responsibility. Aldous’ sense of collectivity is so automatic, in fact, that he is quite prepared to bring Beard in on the solar energy project, simply as a means to “do what’s right by the planet” (34). Aldous’ idealism, however, easily becomes the target of Beard’s world-weary cynicism:

Aldous had a mind that was designed, through the medium of a Norfolk accent, to offer tireless advice, make recommendations, urge changes, or express enthusiasm for some journey or holiday or book or vitamin, which itself was a form of exhortation (29).
Beard detests the man from the outset, and while his character assassination of Aldous is entertainingly executed, as the novel develops it is Aldous who is vindicated. His designs turn out to be inspired, his invention potentially world-changing; it is only in Beard’s selfish hands that it all falls apart. Indeed, without Aldous (who otherwise demonstrated the intention to direct the project towards democratic ownership) the solar project collapses under the weight of its own economic and philosophical contradictions. Interestingly, the novel’s conclusion brings an (admittedly ambiguous hint) that the project will be brought under some form of collective control. With Aldous dead and his work now owned by the government, Beard is sued by those “keen to see the Centre own the patents and show the taxpayer a decent return” (272). This ending is by no means an idyllic resolution; however, it is certainly more promising than Beard’s vision of private capitalisation. Either way, Beard’s main role as protagonist is instrumental in revealing the ‘emergent’ dynamic of a collectivist and sustainable solution to power generation and distribution. What’s more, Beard’s individualism casts those around him in a more noticeably collective form. Aldous himself is anonymous to Beard, at least until he catches him sleeping with his wife(!). Up to that point Aldous belonged to a group which Beard, ‘could not, or chose not to, tell [...] apart [...] Far better to treat them all the same, somewhat distantly, or as if they were one person’ (20).

Though the passage arrives to us initially as part of Beard’s comedic disdain, it is essential in highlighting the ideological antagonism between an ‘emergent’ collective will and the individualistic drive which structures a capitalist mode of production. If Aldous (one of Solar’s understated, ‘emergent’ collective heroes) had occupied a more central role, the novel would not only have ‘fallen flat with moral intent’, as McEwan feared, but also reproduced the same problematic one-
dimensional focus I have been trying to argue against in this article. With Beard’s ideological antagonists at the periphery, this sort of impasse is circumvented, allowing those around him to take on the form of structural, cultural rhythms of the ‘multitude’. Beard, again, is deeply and comically mistaken when he muses, ‘If he was sometimes greedy, selfish, calculating, mendacious, when to be otherwise would embarrass him, then so was everyone else’ (170). It is Beard, in fact, who is the odd one out, who is struggling to hold on to a world which around him, is moving rapidly and ineluctably towards new forms of thinking, governing and producing.

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What then does this say about the ‘new forms of responsibility’ I mentioned at the start of this article? One thing to acknowledge (or admit?) is that neither Solar nor this paper can yield uncomplicated blueprints to, in Adorno’s words, a fully realised ‘emancipated society’ – these remain, in Jameson’s words, mere ‘anticipations’. This, I hope, will not be seen as a cop-out, but as a fair reflection of the extensive and corrosive effects of a narrow individualism, writ large both on the novel itself, its reception, and contemporary climate change discourse more broadly.¹ The

¹ Solar’s interrogation of allegory reflects a widespread and extremely dysfunctional discourse around climate change and responsibility. For instance, a number of books have merged in recent years which, while providing otherwise interesting insights into the dynamics of climate change, seem to revel in the contradiction between climate change and who we are (i.e. our ‘nature’) (e.g. Stoknes 2015; Beattie 2010; Norgaard 2011), and in a way which seems to consolidate these tendencies rather than free us from them. The subtitle alone to George Marshall’s (2014) Don’t Even Think About It – ‘Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change’, for example, gives a powerful indication of what it thinks about the human capacity to change and find new forms of responsibility.
boogieman of the liberal individualism still looms large in modern political thought; the centrality of Beard’s character registers this, but he also embodies the urgency with which we must deconstruct and move beyond such thinking. In light of this, I move now to draw out the advantages of approaching the novel in the way I propose, and some of the broader implications of doing so.

I begin by returning to the subject of the novel’s form. Clearly a central stumbling block in the interpretation of the novel is its generic baggage of ‘allegory’. That critics have focused on allegory is understandable: Solar, as I argued in ‘section II’, lends itself very easily to allegorical readings. The problem, however, is how critics have allowed this to limit how they have approached both the novel itself, and allegory in general. As Rosemund Tuve (qtd. Greenfield 1998, 168) suggests, ‘allegory is a method of reading by which we are made to think about things we already know’; as such, it is a way of opening up interpretation rather than, as already suggested, a ‘cryptogram’ with only one way of being ‘decoded’. Without this understanding, allegory can easily become a ‘hall of mirrors’ in which readers can be trapped, looking for a type of meaning which literary texts routinely confound. As Maureen Quilligan (1992, 227) puts it, ‘If the reader begins with a presumptuous sense that he already knows how to interpret, the narrative will first teach him that he does not’.

In keeping with an idea of allegory as a way to open up interpretation, Solar’s engagement with allegory is demonstrably playful, ironic even – as Trexler (2015) suggests ‘Solar interrogates allegory’ [my emphasis], rather than using it to make simple points. These battles have been fought before. Consider, for example, comments made by J.M. Coetzee that ‘there is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is’ (Coetzee 1988, 3–4). On the
one hand, Coetzee’s provocation here was aimed at what he saw as a reductive literary politics: to a greater extent than McEwan, perhaps, Coetzee was reacting to calls for him to create straightforwardly ‘committed’ literature, a stance which he routinely resisted through his playful engagements with allegory. On the other, this statement too was about remaining humble as to the possibility of the literary text having a life of its own. McEwan seems to have constructed Solar in a similar way; like Coetzee, Solar sets up a simple game in the foreground, only to fatally problematize its simple presuppositions later on: i.e. that we have an essential ‘human nature’; that something as complex as climate change can be exhaustively captured in allegory; that Beard is somehow ‘all of us’ when he is clearly a construct of his environment, his class, of McEwan himself. Beard can no more demonstrate the limits of humankind than Stalinism demonstrated the impossibility of collective politics.

The final thing to say about allegory, then, is that to move beyond it is not easy; its analogies have a serious gravitational pull, combined with a simplicity that simultaneously makes them very easy to dismiss. Indeed, Solar (or any other novel) couldn’t possibly unravel the Gordian knot of climate change, single-handedly. And this is where Jameson’s ‘political unconscious’ comes to the fore. Using Jameson’s three horizons, it is possible to approach the literary space in a way which can help us to focus on other things, to move from the superﬁcies of the text to its ‘unconscious’. What I have offered above is a reading which begins by acknowledging the importance of a text’s individual and social horizons, but which attempts to go beyond them in order to explore the ideological dynamics which structure both the novel and its social context. This is not to dismiss the ﬁrst two horizons; indeed, cold and detached ‘objective’ analyses (such as those associated with historical materialism) are as much limited as those that focus on the individual
(which can easily be drawn into the disorienting vortex of human emotion) –
certainly, we need all three to complete the picture of Jameson’s (1989, 95) ‘crisscrossed and intersected’ web of ‘social reality’.

Though patently difficult, this is precisely the kind of process to which we must all – in cultural contexts or otherwise – be sensitive. Environmental discourse must be examined in similar ways for signs of our world being apprehended, not via its full causal complexity (as climate change deserves to be understood) but as a flat, reified whole. In Jameson’s (1989, 11) own words, the realisation of this challenge – as has been made clear by the devastating impact of climate change on our thinking and (in)action – ‘lie[s] beyond the boundaries of our own world’. Indeed, as Jameson (1989, 11) admits, if one looks to the political unconscious for ready-made ‘forms of collective thinking and collective culture [...] the reader will there find an empty chair reserved for some as yet unrealized, collective, and decentred cultural production of the future, beyond realism and modernism alike’ [my emphasis].

As much as this caveat highlights the importance of contemporary cultural production in connecting us to the anticipations of future forms of social organisation, Jameson is careful also to acknowledge that this is an as yet unrealised process. This process – collective, for sure, but also off the page – will certainly not be enacted by the ‘Beards’ of this world, but by those able to read beyond his failings, to devise and develop models of collective action which for now can only be glimpsed at the margins of our societies, in our collective unconscious. These will only emerge through a long and difficult process of experimentation and courageous action.

Correspondence: Dr C J Maughan, Research Fellow, Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB. chris.maughan@coventry.ac.uk


