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Nuove reciprocità tra umanità e pianeta*

A cura di Elisa Bolchi e Davide Vago

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AN AIR-CONDITIONED GLOBAL WARMING. THE DESCRIPTION OF SETTINGS IN IAN MCEWAN'S *SOLAR*

ELISA BOLCHI

The three main settings of McEwan's *Solar*, a novel described as “the first great global-warming novel” (Walsh 2010) are significant: from London, to the Artic Pole, up to the desert in New Mexico, these places are all described through the interior monologue of the anti-hero Michael Beard, a character allegorical of humanity's greed for selfish over-consumption. As Beard moves in the real environment only through the non-places of supermodernity (Augé), the paper analyses the descriptions of settings to underline how McEwan uses them to write about climate-change in a new “novelistic” way (McEwan).

Keywords: Ian McEwan, ecocriticism, *Solar*, places, environment

*Our notions of place are retroactive fantasy
constructs determined precisely by the corrosive
effects of modernity.*

T. MORTON, *Ecology Without Nature*

1. Introduction

“The hot breath of civilisation”¹. This is how Michael Beard, the protagonist of McEwan's *Solar*, defines global warming. It is a compelling definition made by the Nobel-prize winning physicist head of the New National Centre for Renewable Energy, because it identifies him as a ‘cornucopian’, someone valuing nature only in terms of usefulness and sustaining that “most, if not all, [environmental] dangers are illusory or exaggerated”². This paper will focus on how Beard's cornucopian attitude shows through the way in which he relates to the different places where he lives.

According to Scott Slovic, environmental literature is a combination of epistemological and political writing, where ‘epistemology’ is meant as suggesting “the attempt to illuminate the natural world and the relationship between the human and the non-human” while ‘political’ “implies the effort to persuade an audience to develop a new set of attitudes

¹ I. McEwan, *Solar*, Vintage, London 2011, p. 150.

² G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London 2011, p. 18.

toward the environment”³. To prove that *Solar* contains such political effort⁴, my analysis will start from two of the suggestions proposed by Cheryll Glotfelty in her programmatic introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, i.e.: “What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?” and “Are the values expressed [in this novel] consistent with ecological wisdom?”⁵

2. *The Artic Expedition*

There are three distinctive settings in *Solar*: the Artic, the city of London and the desert. Almost recalling Pierre Dupont, the character invented by Marc Augé for the *Prologue* of his *Non-places*⁶, Michael Beard lives these places mainly through their non-places: planes, airports, comfortable chain hotels or increasingly bigger cars running on motorways.

The first part of the novel, presenting Beard’s trip to the Artic, is overtly taken from McEwan’s experience with the Cape Farewell Project⁷. In 2005 McEwan was invited to join the Cape Farewell Expedition to Spitsbergen together with other sixteen artists and intellectuals to witness the effects of global warming, so that it could be a stimulus for new artistic production on climate change. Because of *Solar* being the result of this experience, it was an eagerly awaited novel by ecocritics who “dared to hope that McEwan’s climate change novel would be a pivotal, if not decisive, influence on public opinion”⁸, so much so that the book was reviewed before it was actually published by Greg Garrard in an article titled *Ian McEwan’s Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism*⁹. Although McEwan had underlined that “the novel would not be didactic”¹⁰, explaining how climate change “will just be the background hum of the book”, when the novel came out it caused great disappointment, mainly because of “McEwan’s decision to write it as a *comic allegory*”¹¹.

³ S. Slovic, *Literature*, in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, D. Jamieson ed., Blackwell, Malden 2001, pp. 254-258, 256.

⁴ Yet, as explained by Tonkin, “McEwan the engaged intellectual [...] and McEwan the novelist remain separate beings. ‘Fiction hates preachiness,’ he affirms. ‘Nor does it much like facts and figures or trends or curves on graphs. Nor do readers much like to be hectored.” B. Tonkin, *Ian McEwan: I hang on to hope in a tide of fear*, “The Independent”, 20.04.2007, http://edge.org/images/Independent_McEwan.pdf (last accessed 8 October 2015).

⁵ C. Glotfelty, *Introduction*, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Ead. ed., The University of Georgia Press, Athens 1996, p. xix.

⁶ M. Augé, *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by J. Howe, Verso, London – New York 1995, pp. 1-6.

⁷ <http://www.capefarewell.com/> (last accessed October 19, 2016)

⁸ G. Garrard, *Solar: Apocalypse Not*, in *Ian McEwan. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, S. Groes ed., Bloomsbury, London – New York 2008, p. 123.

⁹ G. Garrard, *Ian McEwan’s Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism*, “Contemporary Literature”, 50, 2009, 4, pp. 695-720.

¹⁰ D. Zalewski, *The Background Hum. Ian McEwan’s Art of Unease*, “The New Yorker”, 29.02.2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/the-background-hum> (last accessed 8 October 2015).

¹¹ G. Garrard, *The Unbearable Lightness of Green: Air travel, Climate Change and Literature*, “Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism”, 17, 2013, 2, pp. 175-188.

As a matter of fact the Arctic experience is never presented as a way, for the protagonist, to “brave the harshest conditions in order to see for himself”¹². On the contrary, the invitation Beard receives promises that

he would be staying on a ‘well-appointed, toastily-heated vessel of richly-carpeted oak-panelled corridors with tasselled wall lamps’, so a brochure promised, on a ship that would be placidly frozen into a semi-remote fjord [...]. The three harships would be the size of the cabin, limited email opportunities, and a wine list confined to a North African *vin de pays*¹³.

Far from being an enlightening experience, this journey North is ironically described only in terms of means of transports and facilities, and the narration continues in even more sarcastic terms:

The party would comprise twenty artists and scientists concerned with climate change, and conveniently, just ten miles away, was a dramatically retreating glacier whose sheer blue cliffs regularly calved mansion-sized blocks of ice onto the shore of the fjord [...] and predatory polar bears would be shot if necessary by a guide with a high-calibre rifle¹⁴.

The drama of climate change seems to be there just for the artists’ entertainment, to which even endangered species in risk of extinction might be sacrificed.

Once Beard gets to Spitsbergen, however, all these promised comforts prove ineffective. He is completely unprepared to face such a harsh environment and is almost turned into the character of a slapstick comedy by his lumbering body when, to get ready for the extreme Arctic cold, he keeps dressing and undressing, continuously forgetting to wear a piece of clothing and therefore putting on and taking off his several layers of outfit for more than three pages, to finally collide with a column, breaking his goggles.

When Beard’s first ride ‘into the wild’ eventually starts there is no room in his interior monologue for landscape descriptions, as everything is simply subordinated to Beard’s needs:

The wind was so strong and they would be driving straight into it. Deep inside his helmet, the tips of his ears were already numb, and so were the tip of his nose and his toes. [...]. But all this was incidental, blindness and pain he could live with. A more urging problem was oppressing him as he turned towards his snowmobile. In his hurry [...] that morning, he [...] had not set foot inside the bathroom. [...] Now it was minus twenty-six, wind force five, they were pressed for time, a storm was looming [...] and Beard, trapped inside many layers of intractable clothing, needed to urinate¹⁵.

¹² I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 66.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Instead of an account of the beautiful ices and the low sun, the following eight pages present Beard's stream of thoughts only focusing on his need to urinate, that makes it impossible for him to even look at the world around him: "They were on a tongue of land, some three hundred metres wide, that ran between two lakes, or perhaps it was a bay, perhaps the sea was close by. Beard was too cold to ask"¹⁶. When, for fear of a bladder rupture and consequent death for internal infection¹⁷ he eventually stops, he realizes to be on:

a different kind of terrain [...]. Their route made a shallow S through a gully enclosed on each side by thirty-foot walls of rock and ice. A vestigial sense of propriety drew him to the base of one wall¹⁸.

Landscape description is soon over though, as his attention shifts to his penis which, because of the extreme cold, remains attached to the zip of his snowmobile suit, so that Beard convinces himself that it has detached from his body – although, once on the ship, he will find out that the iced object he felt falling through his trousers was, in fact, his lipsalve.

The description of the wild Arctic is thus either subordinated to Beard's needs, or made from indoor settings. One of these, in particular, becomes the object of a parable inside the allegory¹⁹: the boot room²⁰, the changing room where everyone "coming on board must stop" to respect the only basic rule of the ship, "remove and hang up their outer layers"²¹. Although the boot room starts in orderly condition, on the second day someone already makes off with someone else's splash suit, or boots, or goggles, so that by midweek "it was no longer possible for more than two thirds of the company to be outside at the same time"²². By the fourth day the room is turned into "a wasteland of broken dreams"²³ which leads Beard to comment, sarcastically, "How were they to save the earth – assuming it needed saving, which he doubted – when it was so much larger than the boot room?"²⁴

3. "His native corner of the planet": London and private places

Back from Spitsbergen Beard lands in London, and before landing he has the opportunity to observe "his familiar corner of England rotate below him"²⁵. Being a frequent flyer he is

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁹ For McEwan's use of parables in *Solar* see G. Garrard, *Solar: Apocalypse Not*.

²⁰ This episode is directly taken from McEwan's first hand experience, as proved by his post in the Cape Farewell Expedition Blog on 11 March, 2005: *A Boot Room in the Frozen North*, <http://www.capefarewell.com/explore/a-boot-room-in-the-frozen-north.html> (last accessed 8 October 2015).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

“one of those travellers who stare out the window, regardless of the view”²⁶. ‘Regardless’ is indeed an interesting adjective to describe Beard’s attitude towards the world around him, as he only seems to watch the city through its non-places, so that from motorways, trains or planes windows, London appears as a suburban “miraculous combination of chaos and dullness”²⁷.

As Groes claims, “McEwan is one of the foremost explorers of our experience of the modern city, and London in particular has played a central role in his project”²⁸. The bird’s eye perspective here offered to Beard reduces the London area to a single, recognisable place, to that “actual place of birth” that is a constituent of individual identity²⁹: “whichever direction his gaze fell, this was home, his native corner of the planet”³⁰. This is the only moment of “place belonging”, the only “sense of place”³¹ perceived in the novel, because Beard’s experience of his environment becomes visible through a “sense of the space around the home place”³². As a matter of fact London becomes the means to describe Beard’s personal ties to the world while he thinks of how “his past and many of his preoccupations [are] down there, three thousand metres below”, and observing the city from the small window pane he links places to memories and emotions:

He was looking past the City, down the bulging, widening Thames, past oil and gas storage tanks towards the brown flatlands of Kent and Essex and the scene of his childhood, and the outsized hospital where his mother died [...].

Then his gaze was rotated southwards through a silvery haze over the Weald of Sussex towards the soft line of the South Downs, whose gentle folds once cradled his raucous first marriage. [...]

Beyond, lost to view, was Oxford and the laboratory-toiling of his undergraduate years, and the finely calculated courting of his first wife, Maisie³³.

As if to stress this territorial intimacy McEwan describes “the colossal disc of London” drawing his images from nature: the city is “as unplanned as a giant termite nest, as a rain forest”³⁴. This ‘sense of place’, however, is weakened by much more ‘cornucopian’ considera-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13. It is quite an opposite attitude compared to Henry Perowne, the protagonist of *Saturday*, a novel presenting “un’evidente semantizzazione degli spazi”. R. Ferrari, *Una giornata particolare: Saturday*, in Id., *Ian McEwan*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2012. For a specific analysis on McEwan’s use of the city in *Saturday* see also: S. Groes, *Ian McEwan and the Modernist Consciousness of the City in Saturday*, in *Ian McEwan*, Id. ed., pp. 99-114.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁹ M. Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 53.

³⁰ I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 152.

³¹ I here use the concept of ‘sense of place’ with reference to the complex idea of intimacy with the territory, as suggested by S. Iovino, *Ecologia Letteraria*, Edizioni Ambiente, Milano 2006, pos. 1002, and to the character’s experience of his environment. See also: H. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*; B.G. Norton – B. Hannon, *Environmental Values: A Place-Based Theory*, “Environmental Ethics”, 19, 1997, 3, pp. 227-245.

³² B.G. Norton – B. Hannon, *Environmental Values*, pp. 227-245, 227.

³³ I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 148.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

tions, as he admits that big cities cause in him both unease and fascination, thanks to their “giant concrete wounds dressed with steel” before which “the remains of the natural world could only shrink”³⁵.

Because of his indolence and his weight, Beard never walks and, as a result, he is hardly ever outdoor. Anyhow a selfish disrespect for the planet also shows through the description of indoor settings, such as when, waking up in the middle of the night at his lover’s house, Beard goes to the bathroom appreciating the floor “heated all night” which feels “good beneath his cold white feet”, thinking to himself “Let the planet go to hell”³⁶. Also the New National Centre for Renewable Energy itself is, paradoxically, disrespectful of the environment. To build it “a sodden, twenty-acre field” had been bought from a farmer and transformed into “a three-metre-high barbed-wire and concrete post fence”³⁷. Once finished, the only green spots of the Centre will be newly seeded “lawns with paths across them” resembling “every other boring institute in the world”³⁸ and thus becoming itself a non-characterized and “non-symbolized surface of the planet”³⁹, in a word: a non-place.

This anti-ecologic attitude plays a pivotal role in the turning point of the novel thanks to the polar-bear rug in Beard’s sitting-room. It is this rug – an emblematic anti-ecologic object – that, as if coming alive and leaping forward “with its open mouth and yellow teeth bucking into the air”, causes Tom Aldous, a young researcher working for the Centre, to slip and fall, beating his head on the glass coffee table. The engaged researcher, the only character informed on the consequences of climate change and in possession of what looks like a plausible solution to global warming, is thus ironically killed by a polar-bear, although a polar-bear rug:

The bear’s hard, glassy eyes each captured a warped parallelogram of the sitting-room windows and looked murderous. It was the dead polar bears you had to watch⁴⁰.

For fear of being prosecuted for murder, Beard does not call for help but steals Aldous’ projects for Artificial Photosynthesis (in order to build his future career on them) and runs off his own house.

4. *Desert Solitaire?*

The final symbolic setting is the New Mexico desert⁴¹, where Beard has finally managed to build the Artificial Photosynthesis Plant thanks to Tom Aldous’ notes. As it had happened

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁹ M. Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴¹ There would be a lot to say about the symbolism of the desert connected to the *Holy Scriptures*. I just want to stress here how, in the *Gospels*, the desert is both the place that might present dangers for the body and the soul (2Cor. 11, 26; Hebr. 11, 38) and the refuge for the persecuted (1 Reg. 19, 3s.). Beard actually goes to the

in the Arctic, also in the desert Beard only stays in those ‘clinical settings’ of supermodernity⁴², passing from an air-conditioned hotel to a diner, always driving his SUV, the only kind of car which can comfortably accommodate his cumbersome body. Landscapes are solely observed from inside a vehicle, and described in terms of unbearable heat and deserted two-lane roads dissolving “into a mess of heat warp”⁴³. When Beard eventually decides to face the desert, stepping out of his well refrigerated car into the 112 degrees Fahrenheit, he feels dizzy and must hold firmly to the car door handle not to drop to the ground.

His experience with extreme environment is, once again, one of inadequacy. Yet, while in the Arctic, trapped in his cabin, he had wondered how he could “have imagined that being indoors eighteen hours a day with twenty others in a cramped space was a portal to liberty”⁴⁴, in the desert Beard experiences, at last, a sense of freedom thanks to “the cloudless sky, blueish-black at the zenith, and the empty landscape before him”. Probably because he believes this landscape to be “every Englishman’s ideal of America – the open road narrowing to the horizon, the colossal space, the possibilities”⁴⁵. The sense of freedom is actually evoked by a deserted land available for exploitation. So much so that it is only the vision of the site of the Artificial Photosynthesis Plant, with its “Twenty-three big tilted panels” gleaming under the sun, its “mess of pipework and valves”, its tanks, power lines and the wooden pylons standing “in succession across the immensity of semi-desert”⁴⁶, to arouse a strong emotion in Beard.

Apart from these two ecstatic moments, only glimpses of wilderness are caught by a scientist who cannot even distinguish crickets from cicadas.

5. Conclusions

If the entire novel is an allegory of humanity’s greed for selfish over-consumption, this allegory is made more explicit through the description of settings. From Beard’s apartment, which is an allegory of what he is, as it reflects “some aspects of himself, his worst fattest self”⁴⁷, up to the Boot room in the Arctic expedition, serving as an allegory of our role towards the planet.

desert after the accusation of being the ‘Nazi-professor’ for an unfortunate assertion about women and physics, and in the desert several dangers present to him both for his body (Tarpin threatening him of death, Braby’s lawyer suing him, etc.) and his soul (Darlene wanting him to marry her while Melissa is arriving from England to claim her possession of him).

⁴² Cfr. L. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism. Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2005.

⁴³ I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 316.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

Solar was not met with great approval among ecocritical scholars⁴⁸, partly because it contains no apocalyptic predictions, as the title of Greg Garrard's essay *Solar: Apocalypse Not* suggests. Yet it is my belief that McEwan's choice to avoid apocalyptic scenarios and write, instead, an ironical allegory of self-reproach focusing on human behaviour in everyday life might prove a new and effective way for climate fiction⁴⁹.

As Cheryll Glotfelty suggests in her introduction to Iovino:

un approccio provocatorio, guidato da una visione positiva, [è] di gran lunga preferibile a un atteggiamento di difesa perpetua dettato dall'angoscia, e che non riesce a portare nessun reale cambiamento in quella cultura dominante che intende contrastare⁵⁰.

Through his ironical descriptions McEwan manages to raise an awareness even in the most sceptical readers, those who think, like Beard, that climate change is just "one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that comprised the background to the news"⁵¹.

To conclude I would like to recall a moment, in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, when the protagonist, Newland Archer, discusses Countess Olenska's divorce with the senior-partner of the legal office he works for. While at first Newland completely agrees with the impropriety of her divorce, when this idea is "put into words by this selfish, well-fed and supremely indifferent old man it suddenly became the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant"⁵². The same happens with the readers of *Solar*: McEwan has managed to recreate that "Pharisaic voice" of the society through an annoying, over-weight physicist working on renewable energy whose "interest in technology [is] even weaker than his interest in climate science"⁵³.

⁴⁸ Apart from the already mentioned essays, Greg Garrard recently invited a number of scholars on Academia.edu to confront about his experience on Climate Change teaching. It was a lively and stimulating session where, however, I noticed how ecocritics are still quite sceptical about this novel. See also: J. Cowley, *Solar by Ian McEwan*, "The Guardian", 14.03.2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/14/solar-ian-mcewan> (last accessed 5 October 2015) and C. Tayler, *Solar by Ian McEwan*, "The Guardian", 13.03.2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/13/solar-ian-mcewan> (last accessed 5 October 2015).

⁴⁹ McEwan had been looking for this new way of writing for years, so much so that, back in 2007, he had declared: "in spite of all the reading that I've done around climate change, none of it suggests anything useful in the way of approaching this novelistically". B. Tonkin, *Ian McEwan: I hang on to hope*.

⁵⁰ C. Glotfelty, *Prefazione*, in S. Iovino, *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, Ed. Ambiente, Milano 2006, pos. 39.

⁵¹ I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 21. McEwan explained how it had taken months to establish the "tone of the implied narrator. I feel comfortable now with a certain ironical voice." D. Zalewski, *The Background Hum*.

⁵² E. Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, W.W. Norton & Co., London – New York 2003, p. 62.

⁵³ I. McEwan, *Solar*, p. 32.

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