

# Collective Unconsciousness: Climate Change and Responsibility in Ian McEwan's Solar

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1 **“Collective Unconscious: Climate Change and Responsibility in Ian**  
2 **McEwan’s Solar”**

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6 **Abstract**

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14 are based on patently outdated modes of political thought, especially those oriented  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

21

22 **Keywords:** *climate change; ecocriticism; responsibility; environmental political*  
23 *theory.*

24

## 25 1. Introduction

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

27

28 In certain respects, considerations of blame and responsibility might seem natural in  
29 discussions about climate change. After all, climate change is certainly among the  
30 most pressing challenges we face as a species: it is already thought to cause around  
31 400,000 human deaths a year (DARA and Climate Vulnerable Forum 2012, 17), to  
32 be doing irreversible damage to vital ecosystems, such as coral reefs (Speers et al.  
33 2016), and may, of course, lead to the extinction of the human race (Morgan 2009)  
34 (as well as countless other non-human species (IPPC 2015, 13)). In certain other  
35 respects, however, considerations of responsibility are fiendishly difficult to reconcile  
36 with the sheer scale of climate change. Climate change is not an event which can be  
37 easily mapped in time or space, its effects are numerous and (still) poorly  
38 understood, and take a long and (often) indeterminate amount of time to register  
39 themselves. For example, how do we attribute responsibility for emissions accrued  
40 over a 250 year period (IPPC 2015, 4), especially when many of those involved will  
41 soon be (or are already) dead? Climate change is also much more than simply a  
42 material phenomenon, it is messily entangled with the ideas, cultures, and manifold  
43 irrationalities which make up our human and non-human worlds. Far from being a  
44 graspable and containable problem, it is no less than the material and social  
45 condition of *the entire world*, the culmination of millennia of human (and non-human)  
46 activity.

47

48 In an attempt to address this apparent impasse, this paper makes links between  
49 issues of responsibility, climate change and contemporary literature, using Ian  
50 McEwan's novel, *Solar* (2010) as a case study. The paper addresses not only

51 oversights in the existing critical responses to the novel, but identifies important  
52 insights that the novel can offer into a frontier of the politics of climate change:  
53 collective responsibility. Using and adapting Fredric Jameson's (1989) theory of the  
54 'Political Unconscious', the paper argues that many dominant conceptions about how  
55 to act on climate change (and other environmental problems) are based on patently  
56 outdated modes of political thought, especially those oriented around conceptions of  
57 individual responsibility. Using Jameson's framework, this paper offers a way of  
58 reading beyond the failings of dominant modes of thinking to the anticipations of  
59 collective responsibility and action which exist in the margins of literary texts.

60

61 Literary theorists have repeatedly noted the challenges presented by climate  
62 change's unprecedented spatio-temporal scales. Timothy Morton's (Morton 2010)  
63 concept of the 'hyperobject', for example, frames climate change as something we  
64 are always 'inside', and which we therefore struggle to engage with. Similarly, Rob  
65 Nixon (Nixon 2011, 2) argues that it is precisely climate change's creeping invisibility  
66 – its 'slow violence' – which 'hinder[s] our efforts to mobilize and act decisively'  
67 against it. Despite this, strategies focused on the attribution of personal responsibility  
68 still play a major role in conversation about climate change, from 'grassroots'  
69 campaigns to more 'top-down' initiatives. Invoking Judith Butler's idea of  
70 'responsibilization', Mark Fisher (Fisher 2009, 70) notes the problem of  
71 emphasising individual responsibility within climate change's systemic vastness:  
72 'Instead of saying that everyone – i.e. *every one* – is responsible for climate change,  
73 we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that's the very  
74 problem'. The challenge, as Butler (Butler 2009, 13) herself refers to it, is 'to rethink  
75 and reformulate a conception of global responsibility' in order to create conditions for  
76 a collective response as yet not manifest or obvious.

77

78 In this article, I look at *Solar* as an exemplum of the tensions which abound in  
79 thinking about climate change and responsibility. Unlike almost all of the novel's  
80 critics, however, I draw a number of valuable lessons from the novel. Indeed, not  
81 only does the plot of *Solar* play out key dynamics in thinking about how blame is  
82 routinely apportioned in climate change discourse, but, interestingly, these same  
83 dynamics have also played out in the novel's critical reception. Typically, critics of  
84 the novel have called McEwan to task for, as Richard Kerridge (2010, 160) puts it,  
85 failing to 'imagin[e] for us [...] in artistic form, the feelings we do not yet dare to  
86 have'. Using and adapting Jameson's 'political unconscious', I contend that such  
87 expectations are unrealistic; rarely has literature been able to offer, what Thoerdor  
88 Adorno (qtd. in Jameson, 2004: 51), calls, a 'positive representation of an  
89 emancipated society', without, as McEwan himself puts it, 'falling flat with moral  
90 intent' (qtd. in (RealClimate and Network 2010)). *Solar*, like climate change, cannot  
91 be understood in straightforwardly didactic terms. That said, if read using Jameson's  
92 theory of the political unconscious, one can begin to approach what cannot be  
93 grasped directly; that is, the fatal flaws of our current thinking and glimpses of what  
94 will (or must) come later – in short, a politics of *collective* rather than *individual*  
95 responsibility.

96

97

## 98 **2. Jameson and 'the political unconscious'**

99

100 In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson (1989, 17) argues for 'the priority of the  
101 political interpretation of literary texts [...] not as an optional auxiliary to other

102 interpretative methods [...] but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and of all  
103 interpretation'. Jameson's interest in this regard is not merely the overt ways in which  
104 literary material sometimes addresses political issues, but instead its indirect or  
105 'unconscious' registration of political dynamics. Jameson's work allows us to move  
106 away from worrying about what McEwan (or indeed any other author) allegedly  
107 intended, to emphasising the importance of the *act of reading* in uncovering the vast  
108 unconscious which the literary structure makes accessible to us. 'The literary  
109 structure', he tells us,

110

111 far from being completely realized on any one of its levels tilts powerfully into  
112 the underside or *impense* or *non-dit*, in short, into the very political  
113 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.

116 (Jameson 1989, 49)

117

118 While, as Jameson suggests, texts will always struggle 'in vain' to contain their  
119 contradictions, the actual process of uncovering them is far from straightforward,  
120 particularly given the strength of the forces complicit in their concealment. As  
121 Jameson sees it, our social and political worlds form a complex web, 'crisscrossed  
122 and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural  
123 production all at once' (Jameson 1989, 95). While this complexity is important to  
124 acknowledge for political reasons, this also clearly presents problems to anyone  
125 attempting to understand the world, especially, as we have seen, with something as  
126 multi-scalar and multi-temporal as climate change. Jameson's method for navigating  
127 such a complex landscape is to outline what he calls 'a series of enlarging theoretical

128 horizons' that, in three stages, guide the analysis 'toward one particular order of  
129 textual phenomena' (Jameson 1989, 91, 71). Such an approach achieves the ideal  
130 situation, as Jameson (1989, 45) puts it, of helping us to 'break the reifying habit of  
131 thinking of a given narrative as an object, or as a unified whole, or as a static  
132 structure'.

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

143         Jameson's political unconscious invites us, therefore, to challenge the habits  
144 of cognition that result in simplistic understandings of climate change, ones which  
145 end up misattributing 'blame' at the individual level or even denying its existence  
146 altogether. Jameson's approach does this, not by showcasing particular texts as  
147 exemplars of an ideal vision of the world, but by reading beyond their surfaces, to  
148 their silences and contradictions (as well as their utopian implications).  
149 Contemporary narratives of all kinds (not just those explicitly about climate change)  
150 can similarly be read as, in Jameson's words, 'mythic resolutions of issues' – like  
151 climate change – 'that [we] are unable to articulate conceptually' (Jameson 1989,  
152 79).

153 In sum, a thoroughgoing, multi-levelled analysis such as the one outlined by  
154 Jameson is utterly essential in an understanding a problem like climate change,  
155 especially if such a project is to be brought into the realm of representational and  
156 cultural theory. If climate change, as a phenomenon occurring within history and  
157 bound up with social and economic relations, currently evades representation in the  
158 ways Morton and Nixon have suggested, one option is to look at how it is already  
159 *mis*-represented 'in textual form'; that is, how the text conceals the 'informing power  
160 of forces or contradictions' which underlie climate change. The end result will offer  
161 readings finally commensurate with climate change itself, which through its sheer  
162 existence demands a change in how we look at the world.

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

167

### 168 **3. Ian McEwan - *Solar* (2010)**

169 Ian McEwan's *Solar* tells the story of Michael Beard, a recipient of the Nobel Prize  
170 for physics who finds himself at the forefront of the British attempt to identify  
171 technological solutions to the intertwined crises of energy and the environment.  
172 Despite his first-class education and prestigious profile, Beard's inner world is one of  
173 emotional turmoil and moral disarray. The story begins with Beard distracted from his  
174 duties as head of the 'National Centre for Renewable Energy' amidst the breakdown  
175 of his fifth marriage. As Beard is drawn into a vortex of jealousy, petty revenge, lust  
176 and self-loathing generated by this situation, he is shocked to discover that his wife,  
177 Patrice, is having an affair with one of his research assistants, Tom Aldous. Following



178 a brief but non-violent confrontation, during which Aldous attempts to confide in  
179 Beard that he is on the verge of a solar energy breakthrough, Aldous accidentally  
180 slips and falls, hitting his head on a coffee table. He is killed instantly. Realising he  
181 will almost certainly be accused of Aldous' murder, Beard decides to flee the scene,  
182 though not before planting evidence which would incriminate another of his wife's  
183 lovers, Rodney Tarpin. With a sound alibi of his own, Beard is never a serious  
184 suspect, and Tarpin goes down for the murder having already aroused police  
185 suspicion through previous violent conduct. Shortly after the episode, Beard  
186 discovers papers addressed to him from Aldous detailing the plans for a new type of  
187 solar panel. The rest of the novel is split into two time periods (2005 and 2009)  
188 during which we learn that Beard has set up a business, with the intent to develop  
189 the Aldous' plans, pass them off as his own, and exploit them on the international  
190 market.

191

#### 192 **4. *Solar*'s critical reception**

193 Literary-critical responses to *Solar* have been slow to emerge. In their 2011 review of  
194 'literature and climate change', Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra (2011, 192)  
195 noted a lack of scholarship on the novel, though suggested that *Solar* 'will almost  
196 certainly be the focus of much research' over the coming years. At the time of  
197 writing, however, there remain only a handful of serious critical engagements with  
198 the novel, almost all of which have attempted to draw-out straightforward allegorical  
199 readings relating to the behaviour of the central character, Michael Beard. Ilany  
200 Kogan (2012, 1311), for example, suggests the novel gives us 'the opportunity to be  
201 in touch with human frailties, which, alas, reside in us all'; similarly, Patrick Murphy  
202 (2014, 150), notes the novel's 'pessimistic attitude about human behavior'; and Eva

203 Zemanek (2012, 52), who recommends *Solar's* usefulness in thinking about 'risk', a  
204 point she demonstrates by drawing parallels between 'the risks [Beard] is taking in  
205 his private life' and the risks we are taking collectively with climate change.  
206 Overwhelmingly critics have also rejected the novel on this basis. As Graham  
207 Huggan (2015, 87) suggests, *Solar* has been 'picked on, *with some justification*, as a  
208 misfiring satirical take on the bad "issues novel"' [emphasis added]. These readings,  
209 I argue, depend upon a particularly limited vision of what allegory is or could do, and  
210 certainly preclude the possibility of readings that go beyond the simple parameters  
211 set up by the allegory. I return to this crucial concept in more detail in the section  
212 entitled 'Social Horizon', as well as in the concluding paragraphs of this article.

213 By far the most developed critical engagements with *Solar* have come from  
214 Greg Garrard. In a surprising turn, Garrard wrote what Johns-Putra and Trexler  
215 (2011, 192) described as 'a playful engagement with the novel, analyzing it before it  
216 was published'. Using the development towards what he saw as 'the notion of  
217 human nature' across McEwan's career to date, Garrard (2009, 696) claimed to be  
218 able to extrapolate how McEwan would engage with climate change in *Solar*. Such a  
219 move, suggested Garrard, might permit 'a way around the formal obstacles to writing  
220 a novel about climate change', which had, he said, been bound up in the opposing  
221 poles of 'fatalism' or 'idealism' (2009, 718). As fuel to this hypothesis, Garrard  
222 referred to statements made by McEwan himself, who, ahead of the novel's  
223 publication, suggested that

224

225 The thing that would have killed the book for me, I'm sure, is if I'd taken up  
226 any sort of moral position [...] I needed a get-out clause. And the get-out  
227 clause is, this is an investigation of human nature, with some of the latitude

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

230

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

238           In his following publications on *Solar*, however, Garrard has been unable to  
239   conceal his disappointment. Garrard's main grievance, it seems, is with McEwan's  
240   choice of form, which he sees as instrumental in limiting the potential of the novel to  
241   'to give climate projections a moral salience they otherwise lack, and, by extension,  
242   encourage us to see carbon emissions as damnable rather than foolish' (Garrard  
243   2013, 178). On the contrary, argues Garrard, *Solar* draws up

244

245           a cruelly comic analogy between physical weight and carbon emissions that  
246   implies both obesity and global warming are failures of self-discipline – a  
247   convenient untruth that exonerates the fast food and fast fuel industries. [...]   
248   Yet the analogy of obesity to carbon emissions is inexact, and the  
249   representation of both forms of 'excess' as failures of individual resolve is  
250   deeply misleading. (Garrard 2013, 181–82)

251

252   Garrard's response is surprising, not only in terms of how he understands McEwan's  
253   literary project, but also, I would argue, in terms of what Garrard envisages to be

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

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

274

## 275 **The Political Unconscious I: The Political Horizon**

276

277 In line with the three horizons envisaged by Jameson, my reading begins at the  
278 surface level. The first horizon, Jameson explains, reflects 'the narrow sense of

279 punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time' and 'the  
280 passionate immediacy of struggles between historical individuals' (Jameson 1989,  
281 75). This, according to Jameson is a reasonably straightforward process – the  
282 'ordinary *explication de texte*' – in which the text and its narrative are understood as  
283 'a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own  
284 terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm' (Jameson 1989, 79).  
285 Such a process, argues Jameson, is particularly important for grasping the way in  
286 which all cultural artefacts approach issues 'insurmountable in their own terms' and  
287 as 'mythic resolutions of issues that they are unable to articulate conceptually'.  
288 (Jameson 1989, 79) Seen from this perspective, *Solar* is indeed preoccupied by the  
289 exploits of a deeply uncaring, selfish and troubled individual; against the backdrop of  
290 a global concern like climate change these characteristics are thrown into even  
291 sharper relief, and in ways which appear to fatally undercut any hope that such  
292 individuals might readily adopt more environmentally sound modes of thinking and  
293 acting. Indeed, climate change itself is often only a 'background' concern for Beard.  
294 Throughout the novel's first section (entitled '2000') – bar some minor incidental  
295 details (such as Beard's appointment at the National Centre for Renewable Energy,  
296 and his dealings with Aldous) – we mostly bear witness to Beard's fevered  
297 introspections. In one rare 'worldly' reflection Beard intimates that, for him, climate  
298 change

299

300 was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that *comprised the background*  
301 *to the news*, and he read about it, vaguely deplored it and expected  
302 governments to meet and take action. And of course he knew that a molecule  
303 of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind

304           was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantities. But  
305           he himself had other things to think about. (15-16 [emphasis added]).

306

307 If there is a chief reason for Beard's indifference, then it is quite simply because 'he  
308 himself had other things to think about'. Beard surveys the accumulating inventory of  
309 potential calamity without concern, from the coldly scientific perspective of the  
310 'molecule of carbon dioxide'. There is no space in Beard's appraisal for emotion or  
311 socialised sensibility to what climate change might mean to others. Up to a certain  
312 point, the justification given for Beard's view is an otherwise healthy scepticism,  
313 calling out humankind's myopia for believing itself to be 'always living at the end of  
314 days, that one's own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world' (16).  
315 But Beard's apparent rationalism masks a stridently narrow individualism; the 'other  
316 things to think about' are no more profound than where the next shot of whisky, bout  
317 of intercourse, or deep-fried snack will come from. Beard is indeed, the paragon of  
318 the modern, liberal individual subject, a hard exterior concealing an interior in  
319 emotional chaos: 'he was self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his mind a cluster of  
320 appetites and dreamy thoughts' (169). Despite being self-consciously individualistic,  
321 Beard utterly fails to stay in control of himself, or, rather the competing *versions* of  
322 himself. In perhaps the best example of this (indeed, in a moment which, for Garrard,  
323 undoes the whole novel), awaking after a heavy night's drinking, Beard, 'began to  
324 form the familiar resolution, then dismissed it, for he knew he was no match for that  
325 late-morning version of himself, for example, en route from Berlin, reclining in the  
326 sunlit cabin, a gin and tonic to hand' (184). Beard is not simply a victim of his own  
327 appetites, but rather a schizoid composite of rational calculation and powerful  
328 libidinousness; Beard's inner life becomes vicissitudinous in the extreme, vacillating  
329 between existential crisis and consumerist coma.

330

331 Where Beard is single minded is in the pursuit of profit. His so called 'mission' to get  
332 the solar panel project off the ground, for example, turns out to be little more than a  
333 thinly-veiled money-making scheme. Beard addresses investors on the subject of  
334 climate change for an 'unnaturally inflated fee' but also because if, as a result, he  
335 manages to sell one or two panels 'even by the smallest of fractions, his own  
336 company must benefit' (112). So much is Beard's pursuit of profit a blind compulsion,  
337 in fact, that when he encounters difficulties and attempts to play the victim, we can  
338 only wonder at his audacity:

339

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

345

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

350

351 Pathogens swam in hordes across the moat of his defences, they swarmed  
352 over the castle walls armed with cold sores, mouth ulcers, fatigue, joint pain,  
353 watery bowels, nose acne, blepharitis – a new one this, a disfiguring  
354 inflammation of the eyelids that erupted into white-peaked Mount Fuji styes

355 that pressured his eyeballs, blurring his vision. Insomnia and monomania also  
356 distorted his view (22).

357

358 While important for the development of Beard's character, we must not forget, as  
359 Jameson suggests, that such details are 'symbolic', a means by which 'real social  
360 contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in  
361 the aesthetic realm' (Jameson 1989, 79). In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer  
362 (2004, 304), Jameson's theoretical precursor for the concept of 'horizons', '[to]  
363 acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not  
364 in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer  
365 proportion'. In Jameson's second 'horizon', then, we apprehend this 'larger whole' by  
366 viewing *Solar* as one utterance within 'the essentially antagonistic collective  
367 discourses of social classes'. *Solar's* social relations are at root antagonistic; that is,  
368 as Jameson understands it, 'two opposing discourses [fighting] it out within the  
369 general unity of a shared code' (Jameson 1989, 84). Seen from this perspective,  
370 Beard's actions can be seen beyond the 'chronicle-like' drama of the text, as  
371 utterances which take part in (and influence) larger process; namely, patterns of  
372 social relations.

373

374

## 375 **The Political Unconscious II: The Social Horizon**

376

377 At the level of social relations, one must concede that *Solar* is clearly  
378 conducive to a number of allegorical readings. As Zemanek (2012, 56) suggests,  
379 Beard's story 'in its entirety constitute[s] an allegory' of climate change; however,



380 within this horizon should also be included the broader discursive tensions and  
381 antagonisms relating to class or other forms of social inequality. *Solar* is brimming  
382 with details like this – of Beard’s class hypocrisy, his sexism, and consumerist  
383 apathy. These types of problematic relations are indeed what most readers of *Solar*  
384 (including Garrard) have focussed on, and there is a lot of mileage in them.  
385 Conversely, what I argue here is that, while allegory is useful for identifying certain  
386 social tensions and contradictions reflected by the novel, it should not be where we  
387 end our analysis. Indeed, not only does *Solar*’s allegory ultimately collapse under its  
388 own telegraphed absurdity, but using Jameson’s horizons, it is possible to look  
389 beyond this collapse to another horizon, that of the text’s historical production.

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

405 simply 'watched television for five hours' (5), trying, and failing, to distract himself  
406 with alcohol.

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

424         These episodes also set us up for the rest of the novel within which we  
425 encounter numerous other domestic and personal foibles which become difficult to  
426 dissociate from the broader topic of the social relations which lie behind action and  
427 discourse on climate change. For example, Beard's uneven slovenliness (despite  
428 having an obscenely untidy flat, he is 'clean about his person, vain about his clothes'  
429 (163)); his avoidance of his own accumulating bodily disorders, despite  
430 overwhelming evidence; his imperviousness in the face of huge changes in his life,

431 like the birth of his daughter; and his vast appetite for food and alcohol, while in full  
432 awareness of its detrimental effect on his physical and emotional wellbeing. The  
433 resemblance of Beard's personal foibles to the problems of climate change is more  
434 than merely schematic, there are also linguistic resonances. As if in some kind of  
435 pathetic fallacy, the 'sickness' of the planet begins to manifest in spectacular  
436 sympathy on Beard's body. This phenomenon is best demonstrated in a passage  
437 already quoted, which takes on new significance when considered in the wider  
438 environmental and social context. Beard lists his ailments, including a condition  
439 called 'blepharitis', which, as we have already heard, 'erupted into white-peaked  
440 Mount Fuji styes' (22). Similarly, just before Beard gives his speech to investors he  
441 undergoes an untimely bout of food poisoning, during which

442

443       he felt an oily nausea at something monstrous and rotten from the sea,  
444       stranded on the tidal mud flats of a stagnant estuary, decaying gaseously in  
445       his gut and welling up, contaminating his breath, his words and, suddenly, his  
446       thoughts.

447               "The planet," he said, surprising himself, "is sick." (148)

448

449 The echo of environmental despoilment in both these examples is striking, bringing a  
450 bodily-scale to a global phenomenon. Similarly, Beard's neglected flat, which he  
451 imagines as 'a parallel civilisation, invisible and mute, successful living entities [...]  
452 would have long settled to their specialised feasts, and when the fuel ran out, they  
453 would dry to a smear of charcoal dust' (110). The descriptions of climate change and  
454 personal foibles become intricately and ineluctably intertwined, often sitting side-by-  
455 side in mutual reinforcement. Indications appear, in fact, that Beard himself has

456 begun to notice these resonances: “Don’t be a denier”, Doctor Parks had said,  
457 appearing to refer back to their climate-change chats’ (238).

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

482 individual, then the absurd idea that climate change is somehow a function of our  
483 'nature' begins to collapse.

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

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

508 longer irredeemably entangled in antagonistic social relations, but, instead, can be  
509 seen as part of a dialectical structure, one which moves precisely because of its  
510 contradictions.

511

### 512 **The Political Unconscious III: The Historical Horizon**

513

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

522 By positioning Beard in the ‘untranscendable horizon’ of history, rather than as  
523 a representative of an immovable and ‘essentialised human nature’, one is first able  
524 to grasp his role within a historical contestation at the level of a contingent and  
525 mutable ideology. In short, Beard’s antagonism is changeable, his position not one of  
526 ahistorical ‘essence’ but of the adversarial (and highly unstable) forces of the  
527 ‘dominant’ and ‘emergent’ (to borrow Raymond Williams’ (2009, 121–27) famous  
528 terminology). Using this figure, Beard’s position may well appear ‘dominant’ now, but  
529 could easily become displaced by ‘emergent’ forces stemming from uniquely  
530 contemporary circumstances, rendering his position ‘residual’ or irrelevant. *Solar*’s  
531 ‘utopian impulse’, if one can call it this, is buried beneath the (admittedly distracting)  
532 surface of Beard’s moral turpitude. By looking beyond this façade, however, one not

533 only sees more clearly the mobilisation of ‘emergent’ forms (i.e. those forming in  
534 response to a world in the midst of environmental catastrophe), but also the  
535 usefulness of the political unconscious: they are – appropriately for emergent forms  
536 – at the periphery or ‘underside’ of the novel’s plot; Beard’s own ‘dominant’ position  
537 manifests with increasing incoherence, attested by his comic foibles and desperate  
538 incoherence.

539         Beard’s dominance is signalled via a cluster of features befitting his identity  
540 position (i.e. white, straight, male), his economic class (i.e. upper-middle, Oxford  
541 educated, affluent), but, most importantly of all, in the novel’s very structure; that is,  
542 via the ‘the traditional protocols of protagonist-centred fiction’. Each simultaneously  
543 confirms Beard’s ‘dominant’ position, though arguably, too, the inevitability of his  
544 demise. He is, as we have seen, utterly atomised: ‘self-sufficient, self-absorbed, his  
545 mind a cluster of appetites and dreamy thoughts’, but in such a way which leaves  
546 him stranded emotionally and politically, for ‘like many clever men who prize  
547 objectivity, he was a solipsist at heart, and in his heart was a nugget of ice’ (169).  
548 Beard is irredeemable, as a ‘childless man at a certain age at the end of his fifth  
549 marriage could afford a touch of nihilism’ (75), and yet he is simultaneously able to  
550 acknowledge that any solution to climate change requires us to step beyond the  
551 individualism he embodies: during his speech to investors, he remarks ‘Virtue is too  
552 passive, too narrow. Virtue can motivate individuals, but for groups, societies, a  
553 whole civilisation, it’s a weak force’ (149).

554         The speech is perhaps the best example in the book of Beard’s desperate  
555 incoherence, dressed up in the clothes of sense. Interestingly, in his review of the  
556 novel, climate scientist, Stefan Rahmstorf, even went as far as to call it a ‘riveting  
557 speech’, one that he would be ‘tempted to steal and use verbatim myself at some  
558 occasion’ (RealClimate and Network 2010). As we have already seen, Beard is on

559 the verge of bodily and mental breakdown throughout the speech; his value system,  
560 too, is equally on the verge of collapse. Though Beard points to the obvious need to  
561 move away from individual thinking, recommending what he calls ‘the pleasures of  
562 ingenuity and co-operation’ (149), he concludes ‘that in a grave situation, a crisis, we  
563 understand, sometimes too late, that it is not in other people, or in the system, or in  
564 the nature of things that the problem lies, but in ourselves, our own follies and  
565 unexamined assumptions’ (155). As we discover, the remarks are not part of a  
566 coherent world-view but merely the first thing that came into his head to say as ‘he  
567 hurried towards his conclusion’: ‘Were his points somewhat forced, or had he  
568 stumbled upon two important truths? No time to consider’ (155).

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

582         Many commentators have come to identify climate change as symptomatic of  
583 the limitations of the current mode of production. This is no less true in *Solar*, where,  
584 in Beard’s words, climate change involves the search for a ‘new energy source for



585 the whole of civilisation' (34). Yet Beard's attempts to cash in on solar energy are  
586 indicative of the contradictions at the heart of his attempt as a 'dominant' to retain  
587 power in the transition to a new mode of production, without considerations of the  
588 new political forms (including ideas of collective responsibility) which must  
589 accompany this. When Beard encounters difficulties in realising his plan, he (of  
590 course) overlooks these contradictions. Instead he imagines a 'conspiracy' (236), or  
591 and blames the 'sclerotic' markets (205) for impeding his attempts to give 'his gift to  
592 the world' (236). By now it is obvious that Beard's difficulties can be traced to his  
593 failure to identify a politically appropriate strategy for rolling out a solar energy  
594 project.

595         In renewable energy discourses, solar energy has enjoyed a number of  
596 positive associations, promising not only a clean energy source, but also an  
597 opportunity to decentralise control of energy generation to the advantage of local  
598 communities (Kunze and Becker 2015). Though there are certainly those who  
599 contest the logistics of this (e.g. MacKay 2010), solar power's symbolic status as an  
600 'energy commons' remains formidable, as demonstrated by cultural and political  
601 phenomena like 'solarpunk' (Hamilton 2017) and the still sizeable number solar  
602 cooperatives in operation today (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. 2018). As such, Beard's  
603 attempt to patent solar energy must be seen as a jarring attempt to enclose an  
604 emblematic energy commons within a regime of industrial-scale capital  
605 accumulation. Moreover, Beard's plan is incoherent within both dominant and  
606 emergent-collective economic paradigms. Again, the problem is best captured in  
607 Beard's own words. During a speech to mark the unveiling of the project, Beard –  
608 with galling false modesty – claims that 'I can claim nothing for myself. I stood, like  
609 Newton, on the shoulders of giants' (249), even going on to add that he 'borrowed  
610 slavishly from nature [...] by imitating photosynthesis' (249-50). Beard thus describes

611 the project not only as a historical 'inevitability', but in terms of a common heritage,  
612 promising 'we will have clean energy, endlessly self-renewing, and we can begin to  
613 draw back from the brink of disastrous, self-destructive global warming' (250).

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

626         Far from being an indication of some universal truth about 'human nature',  
627 Beard's character flaws show 'dominant' modes of thought and production to be both  
628 constructed and redundant – especially in the ideological context of liberal  
629 individualism. Beard, we are told, 'does not believe in inner change only slow inner  
630 and outer decay' (66). The unravelling of Beard's personal life – concretised in his  
631 turbulent love affairs, aggrieved family, the wrongly imprisoned Tarpin, and unpaid  
632 debts – invites us to see the anachronism of the way he thinks, embodying a  
633 dangerously outdated mode of production in personal foibles. This reading is in stark  
634 contrast to, for example, Garrard's concerns over the 'the representation of both  
635 forms of "excess" as failures of individual resolve' (Garrard 2013, 182).

636 But if Beard is the embodiment of a mode of production on the verge of  
637 collapse, where are the viable alternatives, or, as Jameson would put it, the  
638 'anticipations of modes of production'? For an answer, we must return to the political  
639 unconscious: alternatives to Beard's doomed thinking occur in *the background* to  
640 Beard's emblematically 'dominant' modes of thought and action. Nonetheless, the  
641 peripheral alternatives represent the hope – the 'utopian impulse' – within the  
642 'emergent' forces of anticipated modes of production. These concern behaviours  
643 conspicuous at odds with ones we associate with Beard, such as emotional  
644 sensitivity, openness, honesty, collective ownership, loyalty, forgiveness, and  
645 generosity. The literary corollary then to a contestation of an ideology of  
646 'responsibilitization' comes through a deconstruction of the idea that the central  
647 protagonist is the key site of change. We must 'look beyond' Beard, as Gadamer  
648 would put it, to change happening at the periphery, in the text's emergent and  
649 collective forms.

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

658 Beard does not always fail to recognise 'emergent' behaviours when he sees  
659 them, though is condemned only to glimpse them momentarily, or uselessly after the  
660 fact. In perhaps the book's most famous passage Beard becomes what McEwan  
661 calls an 'unwitting thief' (157). The episode concerns Beard's silent confrontation with

662 a man on the train who he assumes is eating his packet of crisps. Readers are led to  
663 believe that indeed the man sitting across from Beard is openly stealing his food,  
664 only to discover later that they indeed belonged to the other man. After discovering  
665 his error Beard

666

667 stood so completely revealed to himself, a naked fool, that he felt purified and  
668 redeemed, like a penitent, like an elated medieval flagellant with a newly  
669 flayed back. That poor fellow whose food and drink you devoured, who offered  
670 you his last morsels, fetched down your luggage, was a friend to man. No, no,  
671 that was not for now, the agony of retrospection must be postponed (127).

672

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

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

683

684 Aldous had a mind that was designed, through the medium of a Norfolk  
685 accent, to offer tireless advice, make recommendations, urge changes, or  
686 express enthusiasm for some journey or holiday or book or vitamin, which  
687 itself was a form of exhortation (29).

688

689 Beard detests the man from the outset, and while his character assassination of  
690 Aldous is entertainingly executed, as the novel develops it is Aldous who is  
691 vindicated. His designs turn out to be inspired, his invention potentially world-  
692 changing; it is only in Beard's selfish hands that it all falls apart. Indeed, without  
693 Aldous (who otherwise demonstrated the intention to direct the project towards  
694 democratic ownership) the solar project collapses under the weight of its own  
695 economic and philosophical contradictions. Interestingly, the novel's conclusion  
696 brings an (admittedly ambiguous hint) that the project will be brought under some  
697 form of collective control. With Aldous dead and his work now owned by the  
698 government, Beard is sued by those "keen to see the Centre own the patents and  
699 show the taxpayer a decent return" (272). This ending is by no means an idyllic  
700 resolution; however, it is certainly more promising than Beard's vision of private  
701 capitalisation. Either way, Beard's main role as protagonist is instrumental in  
702 revealing the 'emergent' dynamic of a collectivist and sustainable solution to power  
703 generation and distribution. What's more, Beard's individualism casts those around  
704 him in a more noticeably collective form. Aldous himself is anonymous to Beard, at  
705 least until he catches him sleeping with his wife(!). Up to that point Aldous belonged  
706 to a group which Beard, 'could not, or chose not to, tell [...] apart [...] Far better to  
707 treat them all the same, somewhat distantly, or as if they were one person' (20).

708         Though the passage arrives to us initially as part of Beard's comedic disdain,  
709 it is essential in highlighting the ideological antagonism between an 'emergent'  
710 collective will and the individualistic drive which structures a capitalist mode of  
711 production. If Aldous (one of *Solar's* understated, 'emergent' collective heroes) had  
712 occupied a more central role, the novel would not only have 'fallen flat with moral  
713 intent', as McEwan feared, but also reproduced the same problematic one-

714 dimensional focus I have been trying to argue against in this article. With Beard's  
715 ideological antagonists at the periphery, this sort of impasse is circumvented,  
716 allowing those around him to take on the form of structural, cultural rhythms of the  
717 'multitude'. Beard, again, is deeply and comically mistaken when he muses, 'If he  
718 was sometimes greedy, selfish, calculating, mendacious, when to be otherwise  
719 would embarrass him, then so was everyone else' (170). It is Beard, in fact, who is  
720 the odd one out, who is struggling to hold on to a world which around him, is moving  
721 rapidly and ineluctably towards new forms of thinking, governing and producing.

722

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724

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

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<sup>1</sup> *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.

732 boogieman of the liberal individualism still looms large in modern political thought;  
733 the centrality of Beard's character registers this, but he also embodies the urgency  
734 with which we must deconstruct and move beyond such thinking. In light of this, I  
735 move now to draw out the advantages of approaching the novel in the way I  
736 propose, and some of the broader implications of doing so.

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

751 In keeping with an idea of allegory as a way to *open up* interpretation, *Solar's*  
752 engagement with allegory is demonstrably playful, ironic even – as Trexler (2015)  
753 suggests '*Solar interrogates allegory*' [my emphasis], rather than using it to make  
754 simple points. These battles have been fought before. Consider, for example,  
755 comments made by J.M. Coetzee that 'there is a game going on between the covers  
756 of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is' (Coetzee 1988, 3–4). On the

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757 one hand, Coetzee's provocation here was aimed at what he saw as a reductive  
758 literary politics: to a greater extent than McEwan, perhaps, Coetzee was reacting to  
759 calls for him to create straightforwardly 'committed' literature, a stance which he  
760 routinely resisted through his playful engagements with allegory. On the other, this  
761 statement too was about remaining humble as to the possibility of the literary text  
762 having a life of its own. McEwan seems to have constructed *Solar* in a similar way;  
763 like Coetzee, *Solar* sets up a simple game in the foreground, only to fatally  
764 problematize its simple presuppositions later on: i.e. that we have an essential  
765 'human nature'; that something as complex as climate change can be exhaustively  
766 captured in allegory; that Beard is somehow 'all of us' when he is clearly a construct  
767 of his environment, his class, of McEwan himself. Beard can no more demonstrate  
768 the limits of humankind than Stalinism demonstrated the impossibility of collective  
769 politics.

770         The final thing to say about allegory, then, is that to move beyond it is not  
771 easy; its analogies have a serious gravitational pull, combined with a simplicity that  
772 simultaneously makes them very easy to dismiss. Indeed, *Solar* (or any other novel)  
773 couldn't possibly unravel the Gordian knot of climate change, single-handedly. And  
774 this is where Jameson's 'political unconscious' comes to the fore. Using Jameson's  
775 three horizons, it is possible to approach the literary space in a way which can help  
776 us to focus on other things, to move from the superficialities of the text to its  
777 'unconscious'. What I have offered above is a reading which begins by  
778 acknowledging the importance of a text's individual and social horizons, but which  
779 attempts to go beyond them in order to explore the ideological dynamics which  
780 structure both the novel and its social context. This is not to dismiss the first two  
781 horizons; indeed, cold and detached 'objective' analyses (such as those associated  
782 with historical materialism) are as much limited as those that focus on the individual



783 (which can easily be drawn into the disorienting vortex of human emotion) –  
784 certainly, we need all three to complete the picture of Jameson's (1989, 95)  
785 'crisscrossed and intersected' web of 'social reality'.

786         Though patently difficult, this is precisely the kind of process to which we must  
787 all – in cultural contexts or otherwise – be sensitive. Environmental discourse must  
788 be examined in similar ways for signs of our world being apprehended, not via its full  
789 causal complexity (as climate change deserves to be understood) but as a flat,  
790 reified whole. In Jameson's (1989, 11) own words, the realisation of this challenge –  
791 as has been made clear by the devastating impact of climate change on our thinking  
792 and (in)action – 'lie[s] beyond the boundaries of our own world'. Indeed, as Jameson  
793 (1989, 11) admits, if one looks to the political unconscious for ready-made 'forms of  
794 collective thinking and collective culture [...] the reader will there find *an empty chair*  
795 reserved for some as yet unrealized, collective, and decentred cultural production of  
796 the future, beyond realism and modernism alike' [my emphasis].

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

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