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A Non-Narratable Future?

Narrating Climate Change in Contemporary Forms of Storytelling

Whenever one encounters theoretical discussions about contemporary climate change narratives, one word that is likely to appear is ‘crisis’: the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh, himself expressly concerned with the representation of climate change in his writing, has argued that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (2016, 9). This essay seeks to attempt a narratological-cum-ecocritical assessment of where the crisis of climate change’s cultural representation may reside; it will, at the same time, discuss select narrative texts that have made climate change their subject, namely Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007), Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010), and Jonathan Franzen’s *The End of the End of the Earth* (2018). It will also evaluate strategies of narration that may be more suited to capture the complexity and uncertainty of our planet’s future, such as the multi-linear, open-ended ‘future narrative’ (cf. Bode / Dietrich 2013; Meifert-Menhard 2013), arguing that narrative negotiations of climate change must adapt to the new historical and cultural conditions this phenomenon entails in order to avoid restrictive representations of what is, in fact, a hyperdimensional, open-ended, and multi-linear temporal development.

1. Introduction

“For ecocritics and environmentalists, it is precisely the future that looms threateningly.” (Garrard 2009, 705)

It seems safe to say that at the time of writing this essay, climate change is everywhere – both as a geo-ecological process and as a media-cultural phenomenon. Its medial representation is intense and highly visible; from ‘Fridays for Future’ to ‘Extinction Rebellion’, climate change activists are adamantly conveying the urgency of this global phenomenon and millions are watching, as well as increasingly participating. Indeed, as Astrid Bracke has argued, the “[c]limate crisis has so much become part of the contemporary cultural consciousness that it forms an inherent background to twenty-first-century life” (2018, 1). Our present, then, is teeming and charged with climate change debates, political and environmental activism, and the distinctive sense that something must happen *now*. Or, as Adam Trexler has claimed in his recent study *Anthropocene Fictions*, “climate change is upon us” (2015, 5), and we had better act today if we want to stand at least a chance of saving the planet.

However, it is exactly this notion of the immediate present, of *now*, that appears to complicate a cultural-historical conceptualization of the earth's future, which is, of course, the ultimate focal point of all climate change debates and measures. While suggestions, ideas, and political agendas on how to stop, or at least significantly delay, the disastrous future effects of global warming abound, *how* this future will actually unfold seems much more difficult to imagine, and even more so to represent in cultural media. Aside from the fact that it has at any moment in history been difficult to precisely predict the future, this is surely in part due to the fact that climate change, and global warming as its principal effect, are what Timothy Morton has termed "hyperobjects" (qtd. in Mertens / Craps 2018, 136), meaning that they are so massively large and complex in both temporal and spatial terms that it is impossible for humans to grasp, much less depict, the scale of their full complexity. This conceptual hyperdimensionality of climate change and its results thus complicates its cultural scaling and negotiation and seems to render it resistant against meaningful, comprehensive representation. It is in this context that Indian-born novelist and climate change writer Amitav Ghosh has described the climate crisis as "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (2016, 9). In such an assessment, he is not alone: ecocritic Greg Garrard similarly terms the global environmental crisis "a crisis of representation" (2009, 709), and Shaun O'Connell claims that "the pending environmental crisis is paralleled by a daunting rhetorical challenge to convey its urgency" (2015, n.p.). It thus seems fair to ask what exactly constitutes these much-debated crises of culture and of the imagination with regard to climate change: does the ecological future of our planet indeed resist artistic, and more specifically literary, mediation? Is climate change, in this sense, non-representable, even non-narratable? And how can this apparent 'crisis' inherent to the literary negotiation of climate change be reconciled with climate change's omnipresence in contemporary media culture at large?

To begin reflecting on these questions, I want to briefly delineate the temporal and epistemological conditions of the Anthropocene, which, though not (yet) an officially acknowledged geological epoch, is generally recognized to be both the historical starting point and the current locus of the climate crisis, thus constituting the timescale in which cultural and literary representations of this crisis are effected. While studies such as those of Bracke and Trexler have demonstrated that anthropogenic climate change has undoubtedly affected cultural and literary production, the Anthropocene, much like its principal effect climate change, significantly escapes attempts of historical and / or cultural conceptualization. Signifying "the extent of human (or anthropogenic) impact on environmental change since the industrial revolution" (Marland 2013, 860), the understanding of this geo-historical period "presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general" (Ghosh 2016, 9). The challenge Ghosh refers to resides in the Anthropocene's problem of 'anticipated retrospectivity': in order to view this period as a separate geological age with all of its long-term

effects and consequences for planet earth, one has to both position oneself imaginatively in the future *and* simultaneously acknowledge the eventual annihilation of this future, since the end of the Anthropocene is generally equated with the end of humankind as we know it today.¹ The Anthropocene thus requires “imagining of the future as if it were already past” (Vermeulen 2017, 872), so that, paradoxically, “there will have been no future in our future” (Mertens / Craps 2018, 135) and all we are left with is a ‘non-future’, a temporal vacuum which is neither accessible nor imaginable from the standpoint of the present. Reflecting upon this epoch of geological history therefore implies a fundamental re-evaluation of “the temporal order of modernity” (Ghosh 2016, 62), as it means to “contemplat[e] the heretofore unimaginable” (O’Connell 2015, n.p.) both in temporal and in historical-conceptual terms.

If the Anthropocene thus deeply challenges our conceptualization of the future, it should come as no surprise that climate change also tests the human imagination and, more specifically, the narrative representation of earth’s future. Ecocritic Greg Garrard has noted that “[n]one of the traditional forms in literature, film, or television documentary is unproblematically suited to capturing the geographical and temporal scale, complexity, and uncertainty of climate change” (2009, 709). Assuming that “conventional plot structures require forms of solution and closure” (Kerridge 2002, 99), and that phenomena such as global warming are highly complex, multidimensional, and intersystematical processes as described above, it indeed appears “absurdly evasive” (*ibid.*) to apply such conventional plot structures to climate change with its indeterminacy and open-endedness.

The “broad cultural awareness of climate crisis” sketched above thus does not only “exis[t] against a background of denial, scepticism and widespread cognitive dissonance” (Bracke 2018, 3) in today’s global society, but also engenders, perhaps more critically, challenges of narrative representation in the literary world. I say ‘more critically’ because the role of literature, and particularly narrative, cannot be underestimated in its capability to shape the public perception of anthropogenic climate change, as the novel provides a spacious laboratory for the human imagination in which actions and their consequences can be displayed, observed, and studied. As Bracke has claimed, “in a time of global climate crisis novels function as experimental spaces in which actual and imagined circumstances are played out, in which ethical and moral dilemmas are considered and in which the world can be understood” (*ibid.*, 7). In short, the novel is a literary form which allows detailed and comprehensive scenario development within a clearly defined temporal and spatial scope; it can sketch and negotiate different versions of how the future may evolve, and one of the key scenarios of the human future is, of course, climate change and all of the consequences for humankind it entails. Despite this, few contemporary novelists have tackled the subject of climate change in their writing; Ghosh somewhat cynically proposes that “[i]t is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel” (2016, 7), referring to the fact that *if* climate change is made the subject of literary fiction, it is often restricted

to ‘cli-fi’ (for instance, Margaret Atwoods’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy [2003-2013], Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* [2012] or T. C. Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth* [2000]) which deal with the very real phenomenon of the climate crisis through a deliberately fictional lens.²

The following essay will attempt to bring these two seemingly contrary aspects of climate change representation into alignment: on the one hand, the difficulty of moulding the potential future effects of climate change into literary (and specifically narrative) artefacts, and on the other, the necessity of creating such artefacts to shape our cultural awareness of the planet’s future. It will do so by examining three recent works of literature which *have* made climate change their subject, albeit in highly different ways: Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007), Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010) and the essay collection *The End of the End of the Earth* by Jonathan Franzen (2018). As different as these three works are in terms of style, narrative technique, and genre, they all serve as cases in point against Amitav Ghosh’s observation of “the peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction” (2016, 9), as they do not resist, but rather yield to a literary negotiation of this pressing global crisis. In meeting this challenge, they employ very different textual and narrative strategies to meet the challenge of modelling the future as an individual, cultural, and historical concept: while Winterson’s novel operates as a networked system of nodes and bifurcations, thus structurally reflecting the future’s temporal and epistemological ‘openness,’ *Solar* counters this (potentially unsettling) openness through episodic narration focussed on the present rather than the future, and Franzen’s essay collection works with associative storytelling, in the process doing away with the hope that it is even still possible to affect the planet’s disastrous future through long-term solutions.

2. Narrating the Future: Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007)

Through a whim of chance, the paperback copy of Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* that I own contains a significant case of misprinting: pages 219 to 246 of the novel are erroneously doubled and appear at the book’s very beginning, preceding its front matter and title page. When I opened the novel for the first time and saw that – as I then thought – it begins quite literally *in medias res*, in the middle of a sentence and on page 219, I did not immediately become sceptical. Here was a novel from one of England’s premier literary figures who had experimented with narrative multiplicity (*Oranges are not the only Fruit*, 1985), temporal and spatial multidimensionality (*Sexing the Cherry*, 1989), and genderless narration (*Written on the Body*, 1992), among other things. It thus seemed plausible, even logical, that a Winterson novel about ecological disaster would resort to the techniques of textual fragmentation and non-linearity. When I later discovered that this was, indeed, a printing error and regular editions of *The Stone Gods* do adhere

to the convention of chronology, I felt a pang of disappointment for the briefest of moments, but I soon began to realize that even without the fragmentation of the text I had originally assumed, Winterson's novel offers a rhizomatic, quasi-hypertextual narrative about anthropogenic climate change that illustrates the temporal and spatial multidimensionality of the topic at hand. *The Stone Gods*' "linked narratives of planetary disaster" (Merola 2014, 124) demonstrates the complex temporal interconnectedness inherent in the climate crisis, as climate change does not only put forward narratives of the future (in the sense of imaginative 'scenarios'), but itself also constitutes a 'future narrative' (cf. Bode / Dietrich 2013): it is a multi-linear, open-ended, and highly interactive story (with humans, of course, as the principal participant agents) that defies any attempt at solution and closure as mentioned above. The definition of future narratives rests on such narratives "containing at least one nodal situation (or node, in short) that allows for more than one continuation" through the text (Meifert-Menhard 2013, 6), and thus positions itself in opposition to traditional conceptions of narratives (termed 'past narratives' in contrast) in which the building of a logically and causally coherent sequence of events is generally regarded to be the most essential factor: "the intrinsic openness of situations and essential unknowability of events yet to come may be reflected thematically in past narratives (PNs), but they are not *performed* in these texts, as they report events that have already happened at the point of their telling" (ibid., 3). Future narratives are, on the other hand, "invariably [...] *multi-linear*" (Bode / Dietrich 2013, 17; emphasis in original); that is, they offer the possibility for situations to develop into different directions with different outcomes, whereas in past narratives, these possibilities have already congealed into one definitive strand of storytelling. Or, in other words: in future narratives, the nodes are still active, while in past narratives, they have been activated and one option has been chosen over all other possible options: "these narratives [i.e., future narratives] *preserve and contain* what can be regarded as defining features of future time, namely that it is yet undecided, open, and multiple, and that it has not yet crystallized into actuality" (Bode / Dietrich 2013, 1). Winterson's novel pursues this strategy of multilinearity through the inclusion of nodes and bifurcations into its structural configuration; thus, *The Stone Gods* demonstrates how writing the future *as* a future narrative (rather than merely a narrative *about* the future) can offer a compelling sense of climate change's multidimensionality and temporal openness in fictional storytelling.

In four parts, *The Stone Gods* follows the plight of the main character Billie / Billy (the name varies between parts, as does the character's gender) and her / his companion, the humanoid robot or *Robo sapiens* Spike. In part one, a female Billie, whose last name is Crusoe, is on the search for a new planet to which humankind can relocate after having destroyed Orbus, the planet currently populated by human beings (and bearing significant similarities to planet Earth): "We are running out of planet and we have found a new one" (Winterson 2007, 4). This new planet, called Planet Blue, "offers us the opportunity to do things differently" (ibid.); it grants humans, in other words, the possibility of a

reset, starting over with the benefit of practice and improved skills as a player of a computer game might: “This time, we’ll be more careful. This time we will learn from our mistakes. The new planet will be home to the universe’s first advanced civilization” (ibid., 7). In the terminology of future narratives, the earth’s population as represented in the novel is able to return to an earlier node and take a different option through the story using an increased level of information, which could lead to a different (and potentially better) outcome for all of humankind (though the novel shows us, as I shall outline later, that this enticing prospect of improvement is in fact a hollow one). This conceptualisation of time, where humans can loop back to a fresh beginning on a hitherto undestroyed, unpolluted, and unexploited planet (using “the clean emptiness of another chance” [ibid., 56]), also centrally informs the novel’s overall textual structure, which is equally looped rather than linear. The text repeatedly reverts back to earlier passages, such as the refrain-like *Everything is imprinted for ever with what it once was*, gesturing toward the circularity of the novel’s temporal configuration. Beside infusing the narrative with such recurrent phrases and sentences, Winterson employs intertextual references (the fact that Billie’s last name is Crusoe is only the most obvious one of these) and the metafictional intertwining of plot levels to signal circularity: the post-World War Three Billie finds a copy of the novel *The Stone Gods* on the tube (in this post eco-apocalyptic world, a curiosity because it is a paper copy and “you don’t see much paper these days” [ibid., 143]) and begins reading the very same novel we have been reading, though she does not start at the beginning: “Reading at random is better” (ibid.), she says. The central motion of the text is thus that of looping repetition, which is realised on different textual levels and crucially, the most devastating aspect of real-life climate change is thus cancelled out in Winterson’s novel: while humans in contemporary reality are not able to re-trace their steps and choose a better path for themselves and the earth’s future, climate change being an unrelentingly linear rather than a forgivingly circular phenomenon, *The Stone Gods* allows for re-trying and un-doing. These are prevalent strategies inherent in many future narratives, especially electronic ones such as computer games (cf. Domsch 2013) and hypertext fiction (cf. Meifert-Menhard 2013), and the implementation of such narrative strategies in the medium of print testifies to the enticement of imagining a fresh start for the planet. The *Robo sapiens* Spike informs Billie that “Human beings will have to begin again. [...] With a pristine planet and abundant natural resources. It might be possible to develop a hi-tech, low-impact society, making the best of our mistakes here, and beginning again differently” (Winterson 2007, 39).

As the novel demonstrates, however, this new chance is not handled productively by humans at all. Billie / Billy exists in several temporal and spatial dimensions, as s / he lives in a futuristic past set 65 million years ago in the first part, in the eighteenth century alongside Captain James Cook on Easter Island in part two, and in a post-World War Three near future in parts three and four. Across this inconceivably vast time span, human history and its anthropogenic impact

on the environment are re-evaluated again and again in an “iterative tale of destruction” (Mertens / Craps 2018, 147) that exposes the temporal and spatial nodes offered by the text as ineffective loci of repetition. After a disastrous expedition to Planet Blue in part one, Billy is a male sailor in part two who witnesses the natives of Easter Island destroy their *Moai* statues and cut down their trees, deliberately destroying their culture and ecosystem in the aftermath of European invasion headed by Captain James Cook. The novel becomes even more dystopian in parts three and four, which are set in an apocalyptic war zone where nature has entirely surrendered to technology and human beings are subjected to a totalitarian system. In all parts, the underlying message is clear: history will inevitably repeat itself and humans are doomed to destroy the world in which they live. As one of the novel’s characters notes, humans exist in “[a] repeating world – same old story” (Winterson 2007, 59), where “life on Orbus began as escaping life from the white planet – and the white planet began escaping life from...who knows where?” (ibid., 68). The implications of such a historical conceptualization for climate change are dire, of course: ultimately, Winterson suggests, human beings would be incapable of making use of a second chance. Or, as Billie puts it, “it’s so depressing if we keep making the same mistakes again and again...” (ibid.). In fact, Planet Blue, the alternative to the destroyed planet Orbus, turns out to be as uninhabitable as Orbus, because the first human impact on this new planet is utterly damaging: the attempt to deflect an asteroid so that it will strike Planet Blue, causing the extinction of the dinosaurs living there (this part of the novel is set 65 million years ago despite its futuristic feel) by triggering a “mini ice age” (Winterson 2007, 91) to make room for humans fails. The asteroid hits early and its energy is too great for Blue to absorb: humans have thus managed “to destroy the place before it had even begun” (ibid.). The activation of a different node therefore proves ineffectual, as human nature, in *The Stone Gods*, is shown to be intrinsically flawed across time and space; indeed, the *Robo Sapiens* Spike seems to be a much more intelligent, compassionate, and kind alternative to humans for most of the novel. Thus, the promising re-try that the characters initially perceive as an opportunity is flattened out into a mere reiteration of what has come before:

Rather than opening up possibilities for humans to intervene differently in their socioecological presents and futures, Winterson’s repeated stories foreclose the likelihood of change. Over eons and across planets, Winterson represents human activity as persistently detrimental. (Merola 2014, 129)

In one of the novel’s many explicitly self-referential passages, Billie muses that her life is shaped (much like the novel’s structure) “[n]ot [by] the stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, but [by] the stories that began again, the ones that twisted away, like a bend in the road” (Winterson 2007, 106). Such strategies of structural and temporal circularity “creat[e] a feeling of connectedness, responsibility, and repetition: regardless of the time and place, people repeat the same mistakes and always destroy the environment” (Mertens / Craps 2018, 148). Thus, Winterson transports her ecological message – humankind’s inevitable destruction of the planet, any planet, it settles on – not only and not primarily through post-apocalyptic science-fiction (though the novel also can be

assigned to this genre) but through writing a future narrative in the *structural* sense, a text teeming with possibility and options that takes the meaning of ‘universe’ literally: “Every second the Universe divides into possibility and most of these possibilities never happen. It is not a universe – there is more than one reading” (Winterson 2007, 83) while, at the same time, showing the ineffectiveness of such options in the hands of human beings. Essentially, Winterson’s novel is about the distortion and permeation of boundaries, both in temporal and in spatial terms. Like the global phenomenon of climate change, the text challenges any attempt to clearly and unambiguously delineate these boundaries. Its characters travel to and inhabit three different planets across a time span of roughly sixty-five million years; thus, the novel maps the dimension of the Anthropocene’s “unthinkable magnitude” with “unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space” (Ghosh 2016, 63). Such a nodal, rhizomatic structuring of time and space offers a constructive approach to thinking about the current ecological crisis, since “[a]cknowledging this interconnectedness to other times and places is essential if one wants to understand climate change” (Mertens / Craps 2018, 149) in all of its dimensions – pointing to the undeniable fact that actions carried out in a localized present have effects on future generations on all sides of the planet. In times of climate change, John Donne’s ‘no man is an island’ seems to ring truer than ever. Its nodal structure also links the novel firmly to the genre of the future narrative, defying the notion of boundaries as being constitutive to shaping a narrative plot, as Ghosh has proposed: “It is through the imposition of [...] boundaries, in time and space, that the world of a novel is created: like the margins of a page, these borders render places into texts, so that they can be read” (2016, 59). In *The Stone Gods*, the future is not contained by such a definitive boundary, which would render it ‘readable’ and ‘manageable’ in temporal-conceptual terms; rather, the future is “treated as a remembered past and *The Stone Gods* is the story of ‘a repeating world’” (Antakyalıoğlu 2012, 978).

3. Negating the Future: Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010)

Ian McEwan’s novel *Solar* generated the phenomenon of ‘anticipated retrospectivity’ inherent in the concept of the Anthropocene even with its publication: it produced a critical ‘review’ *before* it appeared on the literary market. This review, promisingly entitled “Ian McEwan’s Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism,” was written in advance by ecocritic Greg Garrard and appeared in *Contemporary Literature* less than half a year before the publication of *Solar* in March of 2010. In the text, most of which actually revolves around earlier McEwan novels such as *The Child in Time* (1987), *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday* (2005), Garrard is certain that the author’s “next novel will rapidly become a key text in any ecocritical reading list” (2009, 696) and “may well provoke a fundamental shift in ecocritical assumptions” (ibid., 718). Such literary forecasting is risky, of

course (as Garrard himself admits in a footnote to his article), but it demonstrates the eagerness with which critics around the world awaited McEwan's contribution to what is arguably the most pressing issue the world is facing today. Ian McEwan serves as one of England's most outspoken literary figures, and voices his opinion on topical matters such as gender identity, religion, and Brexit profusely both in essayistic newspaper articles and in his fiction. When it was announced that he was working on a novel on climate change, critical anticipations soared. However, *Solar* initially defied all expectations: it is neither a prophetic prediction of the planet's future, nor a straightforward warning about the disastrous effects of the Anthropocene on earth, nor does it offer a post-apocalyptic version of the future as *The Stone Gods* does. Indeed, *Solar* is as firmly rooted in the present as possible. In *Solar*, it is always *now* and never *then*.

This insistence on the present is centrally personified by the novel's protagonist Michael Beard, whose inability to deal with the future borders on the pathological. Both in his personal life and in his professional duty as a climate change expert, Beard lives in the moment, and in the moment only. Indeed, if anything, he orients himself toward the past, as this is the time when he has achieved fame and recognition as a scientist: "One thing was certain: two decades had passed since he last sat down in silence and solitude [...] to have an original hypothesis [...]. He had no new ideas" (McEwan 2010, 19). His complete inability to think ahead and consider what his actions signify for his own (and the planet's) future is demonstrated, for example, by his constant overconsumption of food and drink, leading to an increasingly failing health (being consistent, he also neglects his doctor's repeated advice to adopt a healthier lifestyle), his mental rejection of his girlfriend's pregnancy, as well as his general failure to adequately plan for situations in which he finds himself. When he travels to the Arctic with a group of experts to debate on the topic of climate change, for instance, 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" (Bolchi 2016, 37), struggling to put on layers upon layers of protective clothing and then forgetting to use the restroom beforehand so that his entire attention during the ensuing snowmobile trip is devoted to his imminent urge to urinate rather than to the awareness of traversing a landscape threatened immediately by global warming. Similarly, when Beard is about to give a speech to potential investors at the Savoy hotel on a possible strategy against climate change, he stuffs himself with smoked salmon sandwiches immediately before going on stage, which leads to acute physical discomfort overshadowing his entire talk, his desire to vomit trumping his ability to deliver a convincing rhetorical performance:

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. (McEwan 2010, 204)

Such episodes show Beard's complete absorption in his own private *corporeality* rather than his investment in global and environmental reality, and this is perhaps the novel's most fundamental criticism of human existence in the face of the climate crisis: we (Beard is quite clearly a thinly veiled stand-in for us) revolve

around our own universe(s) in body and soul, while neglecting the needs of the planet at large – we are egocentric rather than ecocentric, and most of us refuse to adopt a large-scale, interconnected and long-term perspective on climate change.³ In this sense, it is questionable whether, as Bracke claims, *Solar* only “deal[s] in a secondary fashion with climate crisis, [as] this theme is always made subservient to Beard’s messy private life and moral failings” (2014, 432). Rather, I would argue that *Solar*’s (and Beard’s) utter involvement in the private, personal ‘now’ rather forcefully gestures toward one of the most pressing issues inherent in the climate crisis as sketched earlier in this essay: if the future becomes conceptually unthinkable to the point of being unmanageable, why not rather stay in the present with all its easeful familiarity? Beard, on the last pages of the novel, agrees – when all of the demons he has conjured up in the past come to haunt him (his girlfriend with his daughter, his affair, the man he caused to be wrongly imprisoned), he muses on what do to next and wonders: “Was he really going to deal with this now, along with everything else? He thought it unlikely. It would take care of itself. Nor would he go to the site tomorrow to speak to the angry crowds. Not would he be saving the world” (McEwan 2010, 383f.). Making meaningful plans in any sense is simply not part of his character, and any character who *does* envision the future (for example, the young and energetically idealistic physicist Tom Aldous who believes he has devised a viable solution for the climate crisis) is obliterated in and through Beard’s all-absorbing presence – in Aldous’ case, quite literally, as he dies in Beard’s living room by stumbling over a polar bear rug after an argument.

This stubborn negation of the future, exemplified prominently by Michael Beard, makes *Solar* almost diametrically opposed to *The Stone Gods* (with its futuristic visions and its structural configuration as a future narrative), yet it shares with Winterson’s novel a clearly allegorical stance on climate change. While in *The Stone Gods*, allegory resides primarily in the novel’s transpositioning of characters to different timescapes while highlighting the similarities between these timescapes and our current climate crisis, McEwan employs an allegorical episodic narrative structure to turn the spotlight on the problems inherent in human behaviour vis-à-vis climate change. Thus, rather than offering a nodal, interrelated, and multilinear narrative configuration in the sense of a ‘future narrative,’ McEwan structures his novel by unilinear, consecutive, and allegorical episodes in which Michael Beard’s actions mirror and emphasize the egocentricity of humankind at large. Each of these episodes thus works toward the same goal – confronting us with an only slightly distorted mirror of our own behaviour in the face of the climate crisis, while, threaded together like beads on a string, consistently leading to the plot’s culmination in utter chaos. Importantly, Beard is not in the least prepared for this chaos when it arrives, having been so intensely involved in the seemingly separate confusions of his private life that he fails to see the story arc, the ‘larger picture’ of how each individual episode contributes to the unravelling of his private and professional life at the novel’s end (which, as the allusion to an oncoming heart attack strongly implies, will also be Beard’s end). The planet’s future in *Solar* therefore is not written as a multidimensional

'hyperobject' like in *The Stone Gods*, but its narrative mediation yields to unilinearity on the "micro-scale" (Wally 2020, 171), focusing on parts rather than on the whole, and on the accessible present rather than on the intangible future. This synecdochal stance is also reflected in one of the novel's central analogies, that between Beard's degenerate body and the planet's failing health:

Through a combination of incontinence and inertia, Beard – gluttonous, avaricious, lustful, slothful, proud, envious, angry – abuses his spherical body for the sake of instant gratification in a manner that all too obviously echoes the way his species abuses the planet. (Jones 2010)

Representing the corrupted celestial body of earth, Beard's overweight, ageing, and increasingly sick body deliberately makes him the subject of ridicule and prompts self-doubt: "That foolish thatch of earlobe-level hair that buttressed his baldness, the new curtain-srag of fat that hung below his armpits, the innocent stupidity of swelling in gut and rear. [...] Naked, he was a disgrace, an idiot, a weakling." (McEwan 2010, 7) Beard himself concedes that "[t]he planet [...] is sick", realizing that "using the word 'sick', rather like vomiting itself, gave Beard some instant relief" (ibid., 204). The body-as-planet / planet-as-body analogy thus reinforces the novel's general concentration on private experience ingrained in the 'now,' and demonstrates its involvement in individual parts rather than an experiential totality that seems conceptually inaccessible to its protagonist, an involvement that is directly reflected in the text's episodic narrative structure, where each episode serves as an allegorical miniature of global ecological problems and processes.

Solar, though initially hailed as McEwan's contribution to the cultural debate on climate change, is thus neither a narrative about the future nor a 'future narrative' in a text-structural sense. Indeed, in its satiric refusal to acknowledge the future and climate change as becoming realities that will eventually have to be dealt with, the novel could not steer farther away from an imaginative deliberation of what our planet will have to face in decades and centuries to come. Any reader searching for predictions, forecasts, or prophecies will be continually disappointed by *Solar's* insistence on the present. However, in its scepticism about the future, *Solar* can be seen to testify to the conflictedness of culturally represented climate change: how *can* we imagine and narratively represent a future that will be eradicated through our very own behaviour? Michael Beard closing his eyes to his – and the planet's – future in a striking case of climate change denial not only serves as an uncomfortable reminder of our collective "cognitive dissonance" (Bracke 2018, 3) in the face of the climate crisis (as Bracke describes it, "knowing about climate crisis, but continuing to live life as if nothing is the matter" [ibid.]), but also, and perhaps more problematically, demonstrates the potential pitfalls of writing climate change, which to McEwan has always seemed "so huge and distorted by facts and figures and graphs and science and then virtue" (Brown 2010) into the form of the novel.

4. Beyond an Epilogue: Jonathan Franzen's *The End of the End of the Earth* (2018)

If *The Stone Gods* revels in apocalyptic futurist scenarios while *Solar*'s Michael Beard much prefers remaining in the (or rather *his*) present, Jonathan Franzen's essay collection *The End of the End of the Earth*, even with its title, seems to position itself beyond the end of the Anthropocene in a gesture of total finality; indeed, as one review of the collection observes, *The End of the End of the Earth* exhibits noticeable scepticism about the future as a meaningful concept and instead reverts back to history as the only source of meaning, "seek[ing] to reconnect, here and now, with a past in which nature was still untainted by human intervention" (Gallix 2018, n.p.). Such a past is accessible, the essays of the collection show, through re-connecting with a species which predates the species of *homo sapiens* by more than one million years: birds. A dedicated and meticulous birdwatcher and 'lister,' Franzen regards birds (which feature prominently in many of the essays) as "most vivid and widespread representatives of the Earth as it was before people arrived on it" and as "our last, our best connection to a natural world that is otherwise receding" (Franzen 2018, 37). What birds remind us of, however, is not only (or even primarily) the value of living in the past, but the value of living in the 'now' (a stance that Michael Beard in *Solar* would very likely embrace): "The stories we tell about the past and imagine for the future are mental constructions that birds can do without. Birds live squarely in the present." (Ibid., 39) Likewise, *The End of the End of the Earth*, while readily acknowledging that "global warming is *the issue* of our time, perhaps the biggest issue in all of human history" (ibid., 21), is not interested in the earth's future or the large-scale development of the Anthropocene, but in adapting our present to the inevitable ecological disaster that will follow: "I don't have any hope that we can stop the change from coming. My only hope is that we can accept the reality in time to prepare for it humanely." (Ibid.) The objective is thus not to persuade us to change our long-term behaviour – it is much too late for that, Franzen believes, since "[d]rastic planetary overheating is a done deal" (ibid., 52) – but to make our present as meaningful as possible by focusing on efforts of ecological conservation and preservation which have an immediate impact on the environment and its species: "His acknowledgment that the macro problem is beyond him allows him to start thinking more creatively about micro solutions: what can be achieved here, now, today." (Crown 2018, n.p.) If *The End* has a decided focus on the present in common with McEwan's *Solar*, it offers an entirely different strategy to make living in this present meaningful: not self-absorbed stasis like in Beard's case, but compassionate small-scale individual action. Through this, Franzen proposes, one avoids the temporal hyper-scaling of climate change as reaching into a far future we neither know nor can predict, a conceptualization that Franzen believes "deeply confuses the human brain, which evolved to focus on the present, not the far future, and on readily perceivable movements, not slow and probabilistic developments" (2018, 50f.). *The*

End of the End of the Earth therefore, despite the decidedly apocalyptic ring its title carries, firmly positions itself against surrendering to the potentially paralysing effects of climate change's apocalyptic far future, and instead puts forward a mode of doing good in the here and now:

The meaning of climate-related actions, because they produce no discernible result, is necessarily eschatological; they refer to a Judgment Day we're hoping to postpone. The mode of meaning of conservation in the Amazon is Franciscan: you're helping something you love, something right in front of you, and you can see the results. (Ibid., 58)⁴

Significantly, Franzen's book does not negotiate the subject of climate change from the point of view of fiction, but through the form of the literary essay, which allows him to reflect on this very form itself as a mode of narration that may potentially be more suited to capture the hyperdimensionality of climate change. He regards the essay as a form which is "something hazarded, not definitive, not authoritative" (ibid., 3), and what the essay collection thus allows him to do is to avoid the pressure of streamlining climate change into a uniformly coherent storyline (with the neatness of a clear beginning and ending); rather, Franzen pursues a purely associative strategy: "If you're looking at a mass of material that doesn't seem to lend itself to storytelling, [...] your only other option is to sort it into categories, grouping similar elements together: *Like goes with like.*" (ibid., 7f.) This organisation of narrative material by association rather than by synthesis allows Franzen to create a "compelling story" (ibid., 7) about the ecological crisis by showing its multiple facets, elements, and dimensions, while at the same time avoiding any simplistic account of climate change. Indeed, he argues that as a narrative in itself, climate change is paradoxically simple: "The story can be told in fewer than a hundred and forty characters: We're taking carbon that used to be sequestered and putting it into the atmosphere, and unless we stop we're fucked" (ibid., 54), but the larger question of "[h]ow do we find meaning in our actions when the world seems to be coming to an end?" (ibid., 19) cannot be answered by any teleologically oriented narrative account. The essay form thus enables a more multidimensional, correlative, and tentative approach to climate change, mitigating it through the use of highly personal experiences and anecdotes, while freeing the overall text from the pressure of having to reconcile these experiences into a meaningful whole.

5. Conclusion

As an author, Franzen admits himself to be "miserably conflicted about climate change" (2018, 44), at once "accept[ing] its supremacy as the environmental issue of our time" and "feel[ing] bullied by its dominance" (ibid.); and this surely reflects a general stance toward our planet's future. It seems safe to say that climate change not only raises questions about individual and global behaviour, but that, "[t]o understand climate change one needs to go beyond normal human experience" (Mertens / Craps 2018, 136), and, significantly, beyond traditional

conceptualizations of narrative. The crux of the representational crisis of climate change may be exactly positioned here: if understanding the literary possibilities of climate change requires nothing less than a reconfiguration of what narrative *is* and how it functions, then it may appear less surprising that very few novelists have tackled this subject in their writing. Or, to put it differently: climate change may simply require *different* narrative strategies to be adequately represented in literary storytelling.

This essay has attempted to evaluate how narrative negotiations of the climate crisis can meaningfully depict this future without surrendering to the paradox of a ‘non-future’ which imaginative conceptions of the Anthropocene suggest. Instead of reverting to neatly teleological narrative strategies that suggest a linear, unrelenting development toward an inevitable apocalypse at whose end a temporal vacuum awaits us, the texts, in various ways, demonstrate that a more multidimensional, defamiliarising approach to the timescape of the future may be more effective in representing climate change within the literary form. While Winterson achieves such an effect through the implementation of nodes and temporal loops that create a multilinear, circular future narrative in *The Stone Gods*, McEwan satirically refuses to have his protagonist involved in the future at all, thus freeing the presentation of the climate crisis from the weight of apocalyptic foreboding that would cause the novel to “fa[ll] flat with moral intent” (Brown 2010, n.p.); Franzen, finally, employs the entirely different narrative mechanism of the essay in order to avoid having to create a consistent and unilinear account of the planet’s future. What these three highly diverse texts show is that narrative representations of climate change must adapt to the new historical and cultural conditions this phenomenon entails in order to avoid succumbing to a ‘crisis of the imagination’ that leaves a cultural void akin to the Anthropocene’s ultimate temporal void.

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¹ Trexler also defines the Anthropocene as “anticipatory, indicating humanity’s probable impacts on geophysical and biological systems for millennia to come” (2015, 1).

² This uneasy relation between the climate crisis and literary productivity also extends to the discipline of literary ecocriticism, as “[c]ontemporary English fiction remains a largely unexplored territory for ecocritics” (Bracke 2014, 434).

³ A central analogy made in the novel, which McEwan has actually identified as *Solaris*’s inspirational germ (cf. Brown 2010), further illustrates this notion of egocentrism: Beard, while on expedition in the Arctic, has to frequent a boot room in which all members of the expedition keep their outdoor equipment. This boot room, a communal space, becomes more and more chaotic and cluttered as time goes on: “Four days ago the room had started out in orderly condition, with all gear hanging on or stowed below the numbered pegs. Finite resources, equally shared, in the golden age of not so long ago. Now it was a ruin.” (McEwan 2010, 108) From here, it is a short step for Beard (and McEwan) to wonder: “How were they to save the earth [...] when it was so much larger than the boot room?” (McEwan 2010, 109)

⁴ Ironically, this focus on the immediate present instead of the far future has brought the charge of being a climate change denier against Franzen, an accusation which he deliberately counters in the essay collection: “In fact, I’m such a climate-science accepter that I don’t even bother having hope for the ice caps” (Franzen 2018, 19). Franzen is not concerned with denying the dire effects of climate change for our planet’s future; rather he wants to get away from vague and tentative dealings with this future by “a right-minded international elite, meeting in nice hotels around the world” (Franzen 2018, 19) and instead focus his – and our – efforts on those projects of environmental conservations whose “benefits are immediate and tangible” (Franzen 2018, 19; cf. Crown 2018).