

THE GLASS

NUMBER 29

SPRING 2017

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Published by the Christian Literary Studies Group, a Literary Society in association with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship. Editorial and subscriptions: *The Glass*, 10 Dene Road, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2AA.

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ISSN 0269-770X

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The Storm-Cloud of the Twenty-First Century: Biblical Apocalypse, Climate Change and Ian McEwan's *Solar*

Andrew Tate

'A work of light is one that seeks light, and that, not for its own sake, but to light all men'— John Ruskin, Letter 63, *Fors Clavigera* (March 1876)¹

WORRYING ABOUT THE WEATHER IS A PECULIARLY BRITISH PASTIME. HOWEVER, IN a barely perceptible way, our meteorological small talk has mutated from phatic diversion into dialogue charged with apocalyptic presentiments. Unseasonable warmth might be a sign of malign, unnatural change; record rainfall – and floods that destroy households – are symptoms of a climate that has, we worry, been irrevocably altered. This insistent twenty-first-century anxiety is not, however, without precedent. In February 1884, John Ruskin – erstwhile defender of Turner and 'Modern Painters', historian of Venice and occasional prophet – gave a brace of lectures at the London Institute that were to be his final public statements. These unsettling talks, published as *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, are an experimental fusion of epistolary reflections with meteorological observation and, typically rich with allusion to biblical texts including Matthew, Job, Joel, Revelation and Malachi, the lectures are replete with homiletic antagonism towards modernity. He re-names the so-called mutating 'storm-cloud' a 'plague-cloud' (*Works*, 34. 9). There is, he notes, no mention of such skies in the vast canon of his own reading – a diverse body of witnesses including Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Milton and the Romantics, Scott, Wordsworth and Byron. Ruskin interpolates diary entries from the previous decade into the narrative; many of his days were spent at Brantwood, his Lake District home on the shores of Coniston since the early 1870s. The specific climatological observations are full of foreboding: on 22 June 1876, for example, he noted, 'Thunderstorm; pitch dark, with no *blackness*, – but deep, high, *filthiness* of lurid, yet not sublimely lurid, smoke-cloud; dense manufacturing mist' (*Works*, 34. 36-7). In a later entry he refers to 'Manchester's devil darkness' (*Works*, 34. 37). The lecture builds to a peroration in which Ruskin as preacher offers a Biblically damning indictment of modern 'blasphemy':

Blanched sun, – blighted grass, – blinded man. – If, in conclusion, you ask me for any conceivable cause or meaning of these things – I can tell you none, according to your modern beliefs; but I can tell you what meaning it would have borne to the men of old time [. . .] All Greek, all Christian, all Jewish prophecy insists on the same truth through a thousand myths; but of all the chief, to former thought, was the fable of the Jewish warrior and prophet, for whom the sun hasted not to go down, with which I leave you to compare at leisure the physical result of your own wars and prophecies, as declared by your own elect journal not fourteen days ago, – that the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has become one on which he never rises. (*Works*, 34. 40-41)

¹The Library Edition of *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., George Allen, 1903-1912, xxviii, pp. 540-1. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically as volume and page number.

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In the 1880s, Ruskin's lectures, given after years in which he had experienced acute mental distress and shortly before his silent final decade, were not well received. However, to re-read them in 2017 might be both salutary and troubling. The early twenty-first century seems to thrive on apocalyptic visions of imminent catastrophe. Indeed, contemporary writers have become extraordinarily skilled at imagining the end of the world. Literary and cinematic visions of what Patrick Parrinder once named the 'ruined' future have become such a defining element of contemporary narrative that they are, at their worst, something of a cliché, an odd form of entertainment that might actually nullify all thoughts of potential disaster instead of sharpening a sense that action is needed.² The world ends – or almost ends – again and again in an overabundance of plagues, floods, alien invasions, neo-fascist dictatorships and, with alarming regularity, zombies. These horrendous scenarios seem to suggest a somewhat dark truth about the state of humanity. 'The truth of late-modernity,' notes one critic, 'is that we love the apocalypse. We truly love it.'³

The principal context for this canon of catastrophe is the chief current threat to life on earth: what Peter Boxall names 'the ongoing, unassailable, slow motion destruction of the planet heralded by climate change'.⁴ 'The Earth is now warmer than it has been for over 90 per cent of its 4.6 billion year history,' warns geophysicist Bill McGuire, 'and by the end of the twenty-first century our planet may see higher temperatures than at any time for the last 150,000 years'.⁵ The potential consequences of anthropogenic climate change are terrifying: floods that might destroy cities; displacement of vast numbers of people; destruction of crops followed by famine; political destabilisation and the end of economic security. This ominous prospect galvanises many into activism whilst others sink into despair and an alarmingly vast number, including some political leaders and industrialists, perpetuate scepticism about humanity's impact on the planet.

A deep theological critique of environmental damage is overdue but progress is being made. 'Global warming is the earth's judgment on the global market empire, and on the heedless consumption it fosters,' claims Michael Northcott, for example.⁶ However, religions that emphasise an apocalyptic teleology are frequently regarded as hostile to justice. More specifically, Christianity is viewed as particularly culpable in perpetuating environmental damage because church teaching emphasises the dominion of human beings over the planet. Peter Scott quotes Lynn White's enormously influential claim, made 50 years ago, that '[w]e shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man'. This 'contribution to the disgracing and subsequent mastery of nature', perpetuated by the creation story of Genesis 1, is part of a bigger, more complex story of theological understandings of the relationship

² Patrick Parrinder, 'The Ruined Futures of British Science Fiction', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader, OUP, 2002, pp. 209-33. My book, *Apocalyptic Fiction*, Bloomsbury, 2017, explores a variety of twenty-first-century iterations of these 'ruined' futures.

³ Michael Titlestad, 'The Logic of the Apocalypse: A Clerical Rejoinder', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 14.1 (2013), pp. 93-110 (p. 104).

⁴ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, [Kindle Edition], p. 216.

⁵ Bill McGuire, *A Guide to the End of the World: Everything You Never Wanted to Know*, OUP, pp. 36-7.

⁶ Michael Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, Darton, 2007, p. 7.

between human beings and ecology.⁷ There is also fairly recent evidence that some Christian communities are particularly sceptical about the reasons for climate change. For example, the results of a 2008 survey conducted in the United States by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press about the occurrence and causes of global warming, analysed by its forum on Religion and Public Life, indicated that only 34% of white Evangelical Protestants believe that climate change is a result of human activity compared with 47% of the population as a whole.⁸

One cultural response to the growing realisation that this incipient environmental disaster cannot simply be wished away is a developing body of climate change fiction or 'Cli-fi'. This emerging canon includes Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Science in the Capital' trilogy (2004-7) and more obliquely, Michel Faber's lyrical, estranging *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014), which imagines an unfolding disaster on earth from the perspective of a Christian missionary to another planet.⁹

This article focuses on Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010), a grotesquely funny novel of ideas; not just an attempt at 'Cli-fi' by an already highly distinguished author, but, more daringly, a climate change comedy, if such a thing is possible. McEwan, one time winner and six-time nominee of the Booker Prize, is the most eminent British writer to publish a novel that focuses so directly on the challenges of climate change. The tripartite narrative tracks a decade in the chaotic life of Michael Beard, a Nobel Prize winning physicist who has long abandoned a serious commitment to his discipline or any sense of ethical responsibility towards other human beings. The erstwhile genius, one who is sufficiently self-aware 'to concede that he never quite got the hang of brotherly feeling', enjoys the pleasures of fame and insouciantly exploits all around him, including ex-wives, current lovers and idealistic young researchers.¹⁰ Beard's opportunism allows him to exploit a breakthrough that might both rescue the planet from the deleterious impact of humanity on the environment and make him a vast sum of money. This essay will address the position of McEwan's satire in the wider context of twenty-first-century fictions of catastrophe. How does a novel described by one critic as 'thoroughly secular' connect with the Biblical form of apocalypse that informed Ruskin's troubled reflections on the changing clouds?¹¹ What theological hope, if any, can ostensibly irreligious climate change fiction offer?

⁷ Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 8. Scott is quoting Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), pp. 1203-7.

⁸ 'Religious Groups' Views of Global Warming', Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life, 16 April 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/16/religious-groups-views-on-global-warming/>, accessed 18 November 2015. For further analysis of the survey see Leo Hickman, 'Just what is it with evangelical Christians and global warming?', *The Guardian*, 17 April 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2009/apr/17/climate-change-religion>, accessed 18 November 2015.

⁹ The most detailed and convincing account of this diverse genre so far is Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, University of Virginia Press, 2015. Trexler names Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) as the first novel to engage directly with greenhouse gas emissions, more than a decade before 'Cli-fi' became a wider publishing phenomenon, p. 8.

¹⁰ Ian McEwan, *Solar*, Vintage, 2011, p. 193. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically.

¹¹ Greg Garrard, 'Solar: Apocalypse Not', in *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Sebastian Groes, second edition, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 123-136 (p. 133).

I.

The Christian eschaton, described by Paul Fiddes as ‘the final advent of the Lord of the cosmos, the last judgement, heaven and hell’ is, *pace* contemporary despair, one that moves from darkness and destruction into the hope of new creation.¹² The popular understanding of apocalypse as spectacular, violent, global cataclysm has displaced the primary signification of *apocalypsis* as revelation, the uncovering of what was previously hidden. Indeed, the Revelation of St John, the last book of the Christian scriptures, begins with this Greek term ‘suggesting a disclosure or unveiling’.¹³ The legacies of this shaping narrative are far from straightforward. For Boxall, the mood of contemporary literature signifies the ‘emergence of a new kind of apocalyptic fear, the sense in the culture not only that we cannot envisage the future clearly, but that there might in fact be no future for us at all’.¹⁴ However, there are also ‘rumours of glory’, to borrow the title of an old Bruce Cockburn song, even in a number of twenty-first-century fictions: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), set in a perpetually gloomy ruined world ‘[l]ike the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world’, is bleak and heart-breaking.¹⁵ However the austere story of a nameless father and son’s walk across a charred, denatured American landscape in search of the coast is also informed by a quiet sense of messianic hope: the father, for example, ‘knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke’ (*The Road*, p. 3).¹⁶ The novel has also been described by George Monbiot, the influential Green activist, as ‘the most important environmental book ever written.’¹⁷ This is a curious piece of hyperbole as the novel does not offer any explanation of the causes of the world’s desolate state. However, since McCarthy represents human beings at their most rapacious and destructive – the travellers encounter horrific scenes of cannibalism during their desperate pilgrimage – the novel is certainly not sanguine about our innate goodness. It also ends with a prelapsarian vision of a harmonious, inexplicably beautiful world before ruin, one that cannot be restored, at least not by wishful thinking. Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-13), a kind of satirical re-writing of the Prometheus myth via a riot of other intertexts including the book of

¹² Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, Blackwell, 2000, p. 6.

¹³ Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, SCM Press, 2010, p. 37.

¹⁴ Boxall, p. 216.

¹⁵ ‘Rumours of Glory’ is a song on Cockburn’s *Humans* (1980). Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Picador, 2007, p. 1. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically.

¹⁶ The novel has attracted a diverse range of theological interpretations. See, for example, Hannah Stark, “‘All These Things He Saw and Did Not See’’: Witnessing the End of the World in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”, *Critical Survey*, 25.2 (2013), 71-84; Stefan Skrimshire, “‘There is no God and we are his prophets’’: Deconstructing Redemption in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15.1 (2011), 1-14; Thomas A. Carlson, ‘With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger’, *Religion & Literature*, 39.3 (2007), 47-71; Shelly L. Rambo, “Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* after the End of the World,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 41.2 (2008), 99-120; D. Marcel DeCoste, “‘A Thing That Even Death Cannot Undo’’: The Operation of the Theological Virtues in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”, *Religion and Literature*, 44.2 (2012), 67-91; Allen Josephs, ‘The Quest for God in *The Road*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 133-145.

¹⁷ George Monbiot, ‘Civilization Ends With A Shut Down of Human Concern. Are We There Already?’ 30 October 2007, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/oct/30/comment.books>, accessed 27 February 2016.

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Genesis and the writing of Jonathan Swift, William Blake and H.G. Wells as well as a variety of dystopian narratives, is similarly pessimistic about humanity's ability to rise above corrupt desires but it also demonstrates a rich engagement with scriptural ideas of faith, hope and love. Both McCarthy and Atwood offer powerful narratives of creation ruined – whether by human hand or some cosmic accident – and remind their readers that the mysterious beauty of the planet should not simply be taken for granted.

II.

How does McEwan's novel connect with this contemporary turn to the transcendent? The author is, after all, an avowed and articulate non-believer – indeed my colleague Arthur Bradley and I included him alongside Martin Amis, Philip Pullman and Salman Rushdie in our study of *The New Atheist Novel* (2010) – who is committed to a rationalist, scrupulously non-transcendent worldview.¹⁸ However, despite McEwan's commitments to principled non-belief, Greg Garrard's description of *Solar* as a 'thoroughly secular novel' and 'above all, not apocalyptic' strike me as wide of the mark for a number of reasons.¹⁹ This claim has more than one valence and might make a Christian reader speculate that, as well as diminishing the prospect of global catastrophe via its comic plot, the novel also neuters the possibility of revelation, of the veiled truth being brought out into the light. Is the primary meaning of apocalypse also evaded? In a number of senses, *Solar* belongs to a subgenre of end-of-the-world fictions that might best be termed pre-apocalyptic: the world that it evokes, ostensibly our own, stands on the brink of irreversible ecological ruin; its protagonist knows that radical change is needed if such a catastrophe is to be averted but has little faith in the possibility of such a moral conversion.²⁰ Beard and his contemporaries are on the threshold of a revelation but seem keener on short-term pleasures rather than the inconvenience of reality.

McEwan's fiction frequently relies on the plot of a middle-aged, middle-class man at a moment of crisis. McEwan's protagonists are often successful professional men whose rational, enlightened worldviews are radically tested by (sometimes literally) violent encounters with disturbingly irrational adversaries. In *Enduring Love* (1997), for example, Jed Parry, a devout individual who suffers from a rare psychiatric disorder, obsessively pursues Joe Rose, a successful writer of popular science. Similarly, in McEwan's circadian novel, *Saturday* (2005), Henry Perowne, a distinguished neurosurgeon, is pursued by a violent man. Baxter's aggressive behaviour, it is revealed, is caused by Huntingdon's disease. These confrontations display McEwan's fascination with scientific materialism and a certain clumsily allegorical mode: the liberal, progressive conscience finds itself in continual opposition to antagonistic, regressive forces that are not just wrong-headed but literally pathological. Michael Beard belongs to this trope of masculinity in crisis but instead of finding some vicious *doppelgänger*, Beard's own adversary is himself: he is clever enough to have been awarded a Nobel Prize as a young man but not smart enough to keep himself in good physical or moral health. McEwan's protagonist is an opportunist who is

¹⁸ Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Philosophy, Fiction and Polemic After 9/11*, Continuum, 2010, p. 16 ff.

¹⁹ Garrard, pp. 133, 135.

²⁰ I discuss the phenomenon of fiction set in the threshold space before an anticipated global disaster in *Apocalyptic Fiction*, 2017, pp. 8-11.

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not guilty of having a single conviction and this is represented as both blessing and curse. The novel reveals Beard's character in a variety of set-pieces involving public shame: these moments include, for example, a misunderstanding about the rightful ownership of a packet of salt and vinegar crisps on a train; a brilliant public lecture on the need to make a radical but self-interested rather than virtue-based change in the public understanding of climate change that is followed by an episode of extravagant vomiting backstage; and, perhaps most distinctively, a comic adventure in the Arctic alongside artists and scientists in which he encounters certain truths about humanity and, at one moment, fears that he has lost his penis to frostbite.

Beard is a serial adulterer and a liar. He has no interest in the scientific work of the institute that he notionally heads until the bizarre accidental death of his young colleague, Tom Aldous (who was also having an affair with Beard's fifth wife). He frames another of his love rivals for murder and steals the ground-breaking research of Aldous, whose ideas about artificial photosynthesis he had arrogantly dismissed. Beard is the scientist as anti-hero: he is not just flawed but a cynical chancer ready to abuse the trust and decency of anybody unfortunate enough to come into his orbit. His increasing weight and failure to deal with health crises – including an ominous lesion on his wrist – are slightly crude symbols of humanity's failure to attend to the causes of incipient climate disaster. He might be a comic figure, a kind of academic Homer Simpson with a Nobel Prize, but Beard's compulsive appetites – for junk food as well as illicit sex – perpetuate a near tragic status. He is a fallen man, though McEwan's decision to make him 'part of that class of men – vaguely unprepossessing, often bald, short, fat, clever – who were unaccountably attractive to certain beautiful women' is a somewhat clichéd version of masculinity in crisis (*Solar*, p. 3). *Solar* is a warning but it is also an exploration of the aesthetic difficulties of engaging with ethical imperatives, especially an ethics that is not grounded in transcendent faith. The novel is as clear as its cynical anti-hero that virtue will not be enough to save human beings or the planet that we seem so determined to destroy.

Jacqueline A. Kellish reads Beard's 'unwillingness to sacrifice convenience, live moderately or to forego his immediate desires in favor of long-term wellness' as a representation of the 'modern human condition writ large'.²¹ Similarly, in his mildly disappointed eco-critical appraisal of *Solar*, Garrard describes the novel as 'a comic allegory of the destructive consequences of selfishness'.²² This debt to a much older – and now deeply unfashionable – form is also recognised by Adam Trexler who describes aspects of the novel variously as 'evolutionary' and 'scientific' allegory.²³ John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is such a significant point of reference in English fiction to have become a condition of possibility for many subgenres of the novel, including contemporary comic realism. Michael Beard may seem to be an unlikely avatar of Bunyan's Christian but *Solar* does, against the grain of its apparent rationalism, suggest a similarly bleak view of humanity's ability to escape its own capacity for self-destruction by sheer force of will. Given McEwan's candid critique of religious practice in his non-fiction, it is not a surprise that any theological implications of the novel might be missed or denied.

²¹ Jacqueline A. Kellish, "'No Laughable Thing under the Sun": Satire, Realism, and the Crisis of Climate Change in Ian McEwan's *Solar*', *Aesthetics of the Anthropocene*, <http://sites.fhi.duke.edu/anthropocene/comedy-and-climate-crisis/>, p. 9.

²² Garrard, p. 124.

²³ Trexler, p. 54, p. 46.

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Certainly, Beard – in an echo of his creator’s essay ‘End of the World Blues’ (2007) – is profoundly distrustful of apocalyptic thought. As the narrative begins, Beard is ‘not wholly sceptical about climate change’ but neither is he in any way exercised about its likely implications. His scepticism about apocalyptic culture appears impishly self-referential on McEwan’s behalf:

And he was unimpressed by some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in ‘peril’, that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds of millions of refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing resources. There was an Old Testament ring to the forewarnings, an air of plague-of-boils and deluge-of-frogs, that suggested a deep and constant inclination, enacted over the centuries, to believe that one was always living at the end of days, that one’s own demise was urgently bound up with the end of the world, and therefore made more sense, or was just a little less irrelevant. The end of the world was never pitched in the present, where it could be seen for the fantasy it was, but just around the corner, and when it did not happen, a new issue, a new date would soon emerge (*Solar*, p. 16).

The millennial beginning of the novel connects with the narrative’s scepticism about apocalyptic teleology. The world has not ended but remains as full of trouble and sorrow as ever. Climate change fear, for the mild sceptic, is ‘yet another beast’ that has been ‘conjured’ by ‘the apocalyptic tendency’ in the ‘absence of any other overwhelming concern’ (*Solar*, p. 16). His grand and rational objections to the varieties of popular catastrophism that periodically emerge are undercut by the fact that he is ‘always on the lookout for an official role with a stipend attached’ (*Solar*, p. 16). In some ways, despite its author’s ecological commitments, the novel cannot quite transcend Beard’s private complacency. However, if we concur with Paul Fiddes’ claim that ‘eschatology [is] the basic mood’ not just of theology but also of ‘literary creation’, *Solar* might be read rather differently.²⁴ Beard’s failure to wake up to his own destructive behaviour is not merely a nihilist’s cry of despair but a warning to the reader. In Garrard’s terms, the scientific ingenuity of Beard’s project to produce artificial photosynthesis – based on plans that he stole from his dead protégé – ‘betrays’ the author’s ‘residual Enlightenment optimism’.²⁵ This in itself is a kind of displaced apocalyptic faith.

McEwan creates a fiction of an amoral man in a world on the brink but he is a writer with a strong sense of ethical commitment. The novel’s episode in the Arctic is inspired by McEwan’s own trip north with Cape Farewell, an organisation dedicated to raising consciousness of climate change via the work of artists, novelists and thinkers. McEwan wrote an essay about his experience called ‘A Boot Room in the Frozen North’ in which he reflects on the difficulties of transcending selfishness. However, his solution is one rooted in generosity:

We must not be too hard on ourselves. If you were banished to another galaxy tomorrow, you would soon be fatally homesick for your brothers and sisters and all their flaws: somewhat co-operative, somewhat selfish, and very funny. But we will not rescue the earth from our own depredations until we understand ourselves a little more, even if we accept that we can never really change our natures.²⁶

²⁴ Fiddes, p. 6.

²⁵ Garrard, p. 125.

²⁶ Ian McEwan, ‘A Boot Room in the Frozen North’ (2005), *Cape Farewell*, <http://www>.

Another narrative complication undercuts the ostensible secularism of *Solar*. Its single epigraph is taken from John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* (1981): 'It gives him great pleasure, makes Rabbit feel rich, to contemplate the world's wasting, to know the earth is mortal too'. *Solar* might then, among other things, be read as an atheist's homage to one of the twentieth century's great theological writers. Updike – who died a year before *Solar* was published – was deeply indebted to the austere theologies of Karl Barth and Søren Kierkegaard and the *Rabbit* trilogy is, in part, a meditation on the presence of grace in an absurd world; Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom is, like Beard after him, unreliable and driven by appetites but he also encounters the gratuity of God's forgiveness. Updike wrote with masterful wit and sympathy of middle-class, middle-aged men in crisis. The *New York Times* review of Updike's novel read Rabbit as an allegory of nation: 'Inconveniently, Harry is also America, going down the rabbit hole.'²⁷ In a stringent review of *Solar*, Leo Robson noted that 'McEwan is unable to adapt Updike's example to his customary purposes. Updike is prissy, sunny and theological where he is pragmatic, apprehensive and secular'.²⁸ If McEwan is sceptical of all apocalyptic presentiments – Christian, political or scientific – this is a novel that tries, and perhaps fails, to come to terms with the finitude of human life. McEwan's novel is neither a sermon against technology nor a misanthropic counsel of despair about the human capacity for self-destruction. Although the novel constantly questions the validity of cultural responses to global problems, it ultimately offers itself as a kind of quasi-religious alternative to the reductive qualities of pure scientific rationalism. As Trexler notes: 'Scientific realism is too abstract to deal with such human minutiae, necessitating the novel. In short, science holds reality, while art stands above it'.²⁹

The novel ends with predictable disaster when Michael's various deceptions – romantic, scientific, commercial, legal – with tragi-comic inevitability, are discovered. As he contemplates escape, once again bingeing in an American diner, the scientist *manqué* is seen by his young daughter who rushes toward him:

As Beard rose to greet her, he felt in his heart an unfamiliar, swelling sensation, but he doubted as he opened his arms to her that anyone would ever believe him now if he tried to pass it off as love (*Solar*, p. 278).

This ambiguous ending, in which it is not absolutely clear whether the protagonist is experiencing a rush of emotion or an incipient cardiac episode also suggests the possibility of messianic change. This might be a realist's parody of conversion: *pace* John Wesley, however, Beard's heart is not 'strangely warmed'.³⁰ However, the rogue scientist's reluctant, unanticipated love for the child that he did not want is a further allegorical move. She will inherit the planet that Michael and his passive, greedy, incompetent generation leave behind.

capefarewell.com/explore/215-a-boot-room-in-the-frozen-north.html, accessed 4 November 2016.

²⁷ John Leonard, Review of *Rabbit is Rich*, *New York Times*, 22 September 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/22/books/updike-rabbitrich.html>, accessed 3 November 2016.

²⁸ Leo Robson, 'Total Eclipse' (review of Ian McEwan, *Solar*), *New Statesman*, 22 March 2010, pp. 52-53.

²⁹ Trexler, p. 54.

³⁰ *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 4 vols. Dent, 1906, I, 102. This famous description by Wesley is also quoted by John Wolffe in *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843-1945*, Routledge, Paul, 1994, pp.20-21.

III.

Solar is a novel that points beyond the world of mundane human activity but it also suggests that all life is interconnected. Tom Aldous' theory of artificial photosynthesis, exploited by his cynical boss for profit, is a reminder that the earth is utterly dependent on its relationship with the sun. Michael Beard is the most important astral body in his own imagined universe but this self-deception, as he must know, cannot finally surpass the laws of physics. More than a century before McEwan's novel, Ruskin, committed to a theistic worldview, similarly reflected on the primacy of the sun in science and culture:

the discovery by modern science that all mortal strength is from the Sun, while it has thrown foolish persons into atheism, is, to wise ones, the most precious testimony to their faith yet given by physical nature; for it gives us the arithmetical and measurable assurance that men vitally active are living sunshine (*Works*, 28. 541).³¹

It would be difficult to describe Beard as 'living sunshine' but *Solar*, like Ruskin, is deeply troubled by the consequences of human disregard for landscape, community and futurity. The theologian Richard Bauckham has reflected on the 'unforeseen and unwanted effects' of the 'western project of scientific-technological domination of nature [. . .] dedicated to the unlimited extension of human power over nature'. Climate change is the most alarming consequence of the conquest of nature. Paraphrasing George Monbiot, Bauckham notes that '[t]he brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe is very nearly over. From a Christian point of view what is obviously at stake here is the proper relationship between humans and the rest of God's creation'.³² This last theological assertion is one that Ruskin would certainly have recognised. *Solar* may seem a very long way from Ruskin's apocalyptic vision given its debt to evolutionary biology and scepticism about the human capacity for selfless action. It is, however, a novel written in the shadow of Ruskin's lamented storm-cloud in which the sun is 'blanched' and humanity is 'blinded'. Ruskin did not leave his reader without hope; the 'storm-cloud' lectures may suggest a despondent, tortured mind – and we have good evidence that this was the case – but they are also the work of a teacher and one who believed that change was possible:

What is best to be done, do you ask me? The answer is plain. Whether you can affect the signs of the sky or not, you can the signs of the times. Whether you can bring the sun back or not, you can assuredly bring back your own cheerfulness, and your own honesty. You may not be able to say to the winds, 'Peace; be still,' but you can cease from the insolence of your own lips, and the troubling of your own passions [. . .] But, the paths of rectitude and piety once regained, who shall say that the promise of old time would not be found to hold for us also? — 'Bring ye all the tithes into my storehouse, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord God, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.' (*Works*, 34. 41)

³¹ For a discussion of this passage and the significance of solar imagery in aspects of Ruskin's writing see Francis O'Gorman, *Late Ruskin: New Contexts*, Ashgate, 2001, p. 111.

³² Richard Bauckham, *Living With Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, Baylor University Press, 2011, pp. 1-2.

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Alastair McIntosh, an ecological activist and academic whose work is infused with a strong sense of the spiritual roots of climate crisis, reminds us that apocalyptic discourse, if worthy of the name, 'implies a transformation, perhaps in consciousness, by which an existing corrupt socio-ecological order is turned upside-down by the astonishing irruption of new hope'.³³ The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that ethical living is only thinkable with what he calls 'conceptions of a possible shared future'.³⁴ *Solar* is a reminder that if we are to participate in a 'shared future', in which the sun shines, a radical change of heart and mind is needed now.

³³ Alastair McIntosh, 'Foreword', in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, Continuum, 2010, vii-xi (p. ix).

³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 250.

Notes on Contributors

David Barratt with Roger Pooley and Leland Ryken edited *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory*, Apollos/Baker Books, 1995. The second edition of his *C. S. Lewis and his World*, retitled: *Narnia: C. S. Lewis and his World* appeared in 2005.

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Dr Roger Kojecký's *T. S. Eliot's Social Criticism* describes Eliot's attempts to engage as a Christian man of letters with social issues. The book, revised (2014) for the Amazon Kindle format, contains first publication of a paper on the role of the clerisy contributed by Eliot to an elite discussion group, The Moot. He is among the contributors to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP). He is Secretary of the Christian Literary Studies Group and has lectured recently at universities in Krakow, Olomouc, Toronto and Beijing. With Andrew Tate he co-edited *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text*.

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