

**CONSIDER BANKS:  
IAIN (M.) BANKS'S *THE WASP FACTORY*  
AND *CONSIDER PHLEBAS***

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*ABSTRACT*

It is the aim of this paper to contrast the first literary novel by Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and the first sci-fi novel by Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (1987). Both Banks are, of course, the same writer, using different names to sign different novels belonging not only to different literary genres but also, arguably, to different cultural domains —the literary and the popular, respectively. Banks is unique among Scottish writers and, perhaps, among all the writers in the world in that he alternates the publication of literary fiction with science-fiction on a yearly basis. Since it is impractical to look at all his production (now close to 20 volumes) in a single article, it is my intention here to look at its beginning in each cycle. The contrast between his two first novels should answer queries about the difference between literary fiction and the so-called popular fiction genres (especially considering how the reader is placed before them) and also about how Scottishness relates to each aspect of Banks' production.

Iain Banks's career is unique among Scottish, and indeed English-speaking, writers: he alternates the publication of literary fiction with science fiction on a yearly basis. Both his literary fiction and his science fiction, which he signs as Iain M. Banks,<sup>1</sup> enjoy popular and critical acclaim. He is now indeed “a big success, or perhaps two big successes” (Morton), depending on how his dual career is regarded. Banks attributes his high sales to “the novelty from one book to the next, the fact that I'm always changing my subject matter and style” (Spurrier). Happy as no other writer in Scotland with his success, Banks has convinced himself that “perhaps it is possible to combine literary excellence and high sales after all” (Marshall).

Banks and his many readers enjoy the merger of mainstream and science fiction in his career. "I," he says, "just relish the fact that I can get away with writing two genres. You can do something using the two different types of writing that you can't get from either by itself" (Jones). But not all critics and reviewers seem to share this ease. Thom Nairn, for instance, uses the paltry excuse of limited space to justify his exclusive focus on Banks's mainstream fiction in an analysis of his work up to 1993. He adds that Banks himself regards *The Bridge*, his third mainstream novel, as his best work (128). To be fair, Nairn also praises Banks's sci-fi novel *Use of Weapons*, which he thinks is exceptional. But he makes no attempt to explain how its quality fits in the general plan of Banks's work.

Banks sees his career as the intersection of two literary genres with the same value for him. *The Wasp Factory* (WF 1985, mainstream) and *Consider Phlebas* (CP 1987, sci-fi) are the starting point of parallel lines of writing dealing with characters who are either concealing or in ignorance of their real identity. Banks finds "nothing hidden in my background that would give an obvious connection" (Marshall). But Banks's position as a Scottish writer with a dual career is enough to justify his interest in identity. Despite his reluctance, his work (especially the mainstream novels) has been seen as part of the Scottish renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, he seems more absorbed by the war for the vindication of science fiction, which he thinks might end the day a sci-fi novel appears on the Booker shortlist (Branscombe).

Preceding Irvine Welsh, Banks has gained a young readership for Scottish fiction that may not be primarily interested in Scottish identity. Banks, soon returned to Scotland after the spell in London leading to the publication of *The Wasp Factory*, is a firmly rooted writer as regards his choice of habitation. Yet he is wary of being classed as a Scottish writer for fear of losing his individuality. He has acknowledged the direct influence of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* on *The Bridge*, but has also declared he knows too little Scottish literature to claim he is part of the "tradition." He sees himself rather as "part of the English *language* tradition" (Robertson). His Scottishness gained momentum after a disaffected adolescence only when Thatcher came to power, which alienated him and made him embrace a staunch anti-Tory political stance (Crumey). But this does not mean that his political inclinations are relevant to his literary interests.

Still, since Banks's mainstream fiction deals primarily with contemporary Scotland it may be rightly seen as part of modern Scottish fiction. His science fiction, located in a remote time and place totally unrelated to Scotland, might seem to question the very meaning of the phrase "Scottish literature." David Punter has neatly solved the problem by arguing that Banks's fiction (of both kinds) is Gothic, haunted like much of today's Scottish fiction by the past and by the search for a "tradition" that might have been invented. The "kryptosfear" of *Feersum Endjinn* (1994, sci-fi) "(which we may regard as a Gothic database, replete with the ghosts of information) is compounded of a terror of the past and a terror of control" (Punter 107). These twin terrors place Banks's fiction at a cross-roads between the need to face both the past and the present, and even the future.

His mainstream novels are parables about the present of Scotland and its difficulties to assume its modern identity. His science fiction, while refusing to look at Scotland, shows a concern for the gigantic forces that time unleashes and for the relative

lack of importance of the individual swayed by them. This is the postmodern answer to the invention of the historical novel by Walter Scott in Scotland. Fredric Jameson observes that science fiction entertains “a relationship of kinship and inversion all at once, of opposition and homology” with the historical novel (284). While the historical novel corresponds to “the emergence of historicity,” science fiction corresponds to “the waning or the blockage of that historicity” which reaches paralysis within Postmodernity (284). The failure of history to lead mankind (or Scotland) to utopia is contested with a renewed but critical utopian impulse located in the imaginary history of Banks's science-fiction civilisations.

The difference between science fiction and literary fiction (or mainstream) is for Banks as a matter of the contrast between the technical problems associated with enforcing the credibility of an imaginary world and the technical problems associated to representing reality:

If you get to a point where you think, ‘For that to happen, the whole society has to be different’ it’s no problem in SF; you just go back and alter the society. If it happens in a mainstream novel, you can’t really do that. So, I feel slightly more comfortable writing SF. But by a degree, a fraction, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you’ve achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination. I’ve always said that if I was forced at the point of a gun to choose between the two, I would rather go on writing science fiction. I enjoy it far more. But I would hate to have to give up either one. (Nicholls)

Notice that for Banks writing science fiction or mainstream fiction entails a *similar degree* of difficulty associated to different technical problems. Accordingly, a novel like *The Wasp Factory* should not be more or less difficulty to read than *Consider Phlebas*: simply, each requires different writing and reading skills that, as Banks shows, may be possessed by the same person. Both books are formidable challenges to the reader: the former because of its daring use of the first person narrator in the telling of a very violent story; the latter for the complexity of its plot and background. Banks' main merit lies in stimulating readers to consume unconventional novels, each challenging in a similar degree but for totally different reasons. Whether all readers are prepared to assume the challenge is another matter. “Quite a few readers read only the mainstream books,” Banks stated in an interview. “Very few SF readers read only the SF. SF readers tend to be a lot more broadminded. Then again, I suspect the narrow minded don’t read me at all: I can’t see them picking up *The Wasp Factory*, can you?” (Ing). Nor *Consider Phlebas*, for that matter. His fiction calls, therefore, for an ideal broad-minded reader ready to leave aside both the snobbery of the literary coterie and of fanatical fandom. It is less much demanding, though, as regards the readers' ability to grasp where Banks's Scottishness lies in his fiction.

As is well known, *The Wasp Factory*, the appalling yet funny confessional autobiography of 17-year-old Frank Cauldhome, was greeted by a mixture of abuse, incomprehension and praise. This was Banks's first published novel but the fourth he had written. The previous three were science-fiction novels — *Use of Weapons* (1974), *Against a Dark Background* (1975), *The Player of Games* (1979)— that Banks would

subsequently publish in radically rewritten versions. “I started *non-science fiction*,” Banks explains, “because... there are more publishers that publish mainstream novels than science fiction —and *The Wasp Factory* was the result of that” (Branscombe, emphasis added). The success of this novel and of the two that followed —*Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge* (both mainstream)— allowed Banks to establish himself as a professional writer; he returned then to science fiction (and to living in Scotland) with *Consider Phlebas*.

*The Wasp Factory* narrates Frank’s discovery of his real identity: he is not a castrated man, as he has been told by his father, but a woman —Frances. “*Factory* was supposed to be,” according to Banks, “about sexism and... well, slagging off religion, really. But most people just regarded it as a horror novel” (Ricketts). As a first person narration, *The Wasp Factory* is an exercise in ventriloquism. Most of the author’s energies are directed towards making Frank’s personality credible within the context of realism. This gives Frank’s atrocities —the slaughtering of diverse animals and the murder of three young children— an immediacy that may have antagonised many reviewers, especially the English. These, Banks argues, misread his novel and, being prejudiced against horror fiction —as, incidentally, he also is— “were using language that was utterly inappropriate, calling it the literary equivalent of a video nasty” (Metcalf). This also alienated many readers, especially women who could have potentially enjoyed most the plot of gender reversal.

A remote child of *Frankenstein*, this novel questions stereotyped gendered identities through the secret experiment that Angus Cauldhame, ex-hippie and a doctor in biochemistry, runs on his daughter Frances. The Cauldhames live on a small Scottish island recalling the place where Frankenstein makes the female monster he finally aborts. A combination of hormones, bromide and lies —Frank has been told the family dog castrated him aged 3— keep Frances’s body within the limits of androgyny, which “he” misreads as rampant masculinity. Frank’s shock when realising that he’s a woman shocks readers into an awareness of how narrow-mindedly we define gender. On the other hand, Banks denounces mankind’s absurd dependence on religion and patterns of behaviour that ultimately mean nothing through Frank’s obsession for ritual and his dependence of the wasp factory, a complex torture chamber where dying wasps supposedly indicate the forking paths in Frank’s life.

Presumably, Frank’s punishment and the irony involved in his previous endorsement of sexism is meant to exalt women. Frank’s chauvinist, masculinist discourse —he hates women because “they are weak and stupid and live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them” (*WF* 43)— must give way to humiliation: “I was proud; eunuch but unique; a fierce and noble presence in my lands, a crippled warrior, fallen prince... Now I find I was the fool all along” (*WF* 183). Looking backwards, Frank justifies his violence as a revenge on those who, unlike him as a castrated man, could continue their species. Frank, though, tries to convince him/herself that gender is irrelevant: “But I *am* still me; I *am* the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appalling) crimes to *my* name” (*WF* 182). But here precisely lies the most controversial point in this novel. His new female identity seems demeaning; sexual intercourse with a man and giving birth to a child become nightmarish possibilities for Frank/Frances. Banks’s anti-sexist fantasy has thus a double-edged reading: it is a horror

story for men and a partly failed feminist vindication for women. The fable Banks narrates is less effective in its exhortation of anti-sexist attitudes than in its ambiguous portrait of contemptible masculinist ideology. The lesson Frank is taught leads to his appreciating his new female identity as *punishment*. The novel ends with Frances anxiously waiting for the reaction of her beloved, mad brother Eric to this new identity she is scared to assume. This might be realistic, though: like Frances's, women's identity is in the hands of unstable men like Angus and Eric with the power to alter it.

Scottishness is not a primary issue for Frank, nor apparently for Banks. Despite Frank's passing remarks to his living in Scotland, the sense of location may be blurred, especially for readers with no actual experience of life in Britain. As is usual in Scottish fiction, the Scottish voice of the first person narrator reaches us distorted through the medium of standard English prose. The closer Banks comes to giving an insight into particularly Scottish life is in the comic section about Frank's pub crawl (*WF* 74–86), with cameo appearances by a punk band who sing with an Inverness accent and a heavily-accented Glasgow girl. In the same episode an utterly drunk Frank pronounces a speech (or so he thinks) in “correctly spoken English” (*WF* 80) that his companions fail to understand on the state of the “Union,” a word he had initially mistaken for trade union. Angus corrected Frank's mistake by informing him that the many Union Streets in Britain celebrate rather the Union between Scotland and England, “doubtless with a view to the opportunities for profit which this early form of takeover bid offered” (*WF* 81). The Union is thus linked by the anarchist Angus with the atmosphere of his own times, marked by Thatcherite liberalism and its disastrous takeover of Scottish industrial economics, labour and nationalist politics.

Among others, Thom Nairn has claimed that the Scottishness of *The Wasp Factory* is to be found in its bizarre sense of humour (127), though he has not clarified whether this puts Banks's novel off-limits for non-Scottish readers. Banks's arguably Scottish sense of humour is at its best in the sections concerning Frank and his mad brother Eric, and the murders of three children. Eric's function is to place Frank's own brand of insanity at a different, more tolerable level by contrast. Thus, despite his own cruelty, Frank is deeply distressed at Eric's burning—and eating!—of dogs. The fact that Eric and not Frank is characterised as the real madman also stresses the idea that Frank's killing of the children Paul (his step-brother), Blyth and Esmeralda (his cousins) is not the result of insanity. The grotesque deaths of these children needn't be taken seriously; in fact, they *are* a joke between author and reader. Frank's killing spree—he calls it “just a stage I was going through” (42)—keeps him busy between the ages of 6 and 9. Comedy depends on this and on Frank's far-fetched motivations and methods. Blyth is poisoned by an adder planted in his wooden leg as a revenge for having burned Eric's pet rabbits with a flame thrower. Frank kills Paul by persuading him to hit on the nose a 500-kg German bomb stranded on the island since World War II; his motivation is that Paul's birth coincided with Frank's alleged castration. Esmeralda is killed because “I had, after all, accounted for two male children and thus done womankind something of a statistical favour” (*WF* 87). Tied to a giant kite, she flies away into the sea never to be seen again.

The insistent use of this type of black comedy characterises *The Wasp Factory* as surrealist fantasy. It might well be, taking into account the work of other contemporary Scottish writers like Irvine Welsh, that black comedy is *the* essential ingredient in

the modern view of Scotland also reflected by Gray or Kelman. But whereas Welsh deals with extreme squalor and violence in relation to the identifiable, decaying Scotland of the worst city slums, Banks's fiction is located, as least in *The Wasp Factory*, in a Scotland of the surrealistic imagination where fathers like Angus run mad experiments at the expense of their children. A Scotland much closer, thus, to Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) with its mad surgeon Godwin Baxter and its new Eve, Bella Baxter. Strangely enough, Banks's sense of humour is sorely missed in the description of Frank's rituals and ceremonies which, despite their sensationalism, are the least interesting sections of *Factory*. Violence against animals contributes to Frank's characterisation as a chauvinist macho man. But the odd deadpan tone of the sections narrating his "sacrifices" elicit impatience and disgust from readers rather than a deep reflection on the (mis)functions of religion. This might be attributed to Banks's taking religion much more seriously than the tone of other aspects of this novel suggests.

*The Wasp Factory* is simultaneously a highly individual work and a work highly representative of a particular moment in Scottish literature. Placed perhaps best in the company of Alasdair Gray and Irvine Welsh, Iain Banks manages to involve the reader in a surrealistic fantasy about Scotland dominated by a black sense of humour. This is not to be mistaken with English irony; quite the contrary, Banks's excellent rendition of the bizarre points out at Scotland as a land where the Spanish notion of *esperpento* is by no means out of place.

Banks's science fiction falls within the sub-genre of the space opera, popularised by the 1930s American pulp magazines, Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga and George Lucas's *Star Wars* films. Brian Aldiss defines space opera as "Wide-Screen Baroque—a kind of free-wheeling interplanetary adventure, full of brilliant scenery, dramatic scenes and a joyous taking for granted of the unlikely" (qtd. in Morton). This is indeed what Banks offers. "Mainstream literature," he argues, "seems like painting in miniature a lot of the time, and then suddenly you get to science fiction and you get the opportunity to work on a proper canvas. [...] There may well be more art in the miniature, but by God, it's more fun in the bigger visions" (Daoust).

The main novelty in Banks's sci-fi is the replacement of the dominant imperialistic ideology of American militaristic space opera by a left-wing, utopian approach, arguably his particularly Scottish contribution to science fiction. The technological neologisms, the rich description of the outlandish locations and the tragic adventure at the core of the novel may seem to have virtually nothing to do with Scotland. Yet, the impression is that Banks is contributing a significantly Scottish point of view to the genre, based on the description of utopia as a clearly European dream joining leisure and culture. *Consider Phlebas* introduced readers to the civilisation Banks had been dreaming of for more than ten years, meaningfully named the Culture. "I invented the Culture," Banks explains "in reaction to a lot of right-wing, dystopian SF I'd read as a kid" (Ing). A loose federation of diverse humanoid species established approximately "nine thousand years ago" (Banks "Few Notes," emphasis added), the Culture is based on the idea that people living in spaceships travelling for generations to distant galaxies would not obey centralised imperial power—and one can read here clear overtones of the current postcolonial situation as much as overtones of the diverse nationalisms in Europe. The relationships of mutual interdependence in deep space would lead to a system that Banks defines as "socialism within, anarchy



without" (Banks "Few Notes"), accompanied by an utopian control of pleasure given by genetic engineering and leisure, given by the machines that run the Culture.

Intriguingly, Banks uses the main character in *Consider Phlebas*, Bora Horza Gobuchul, to consider the shortcomings of the Culture's perfect utopia. Horza, a mercenary, sides with the enemy Idirans—a fanatical race of monsters—in the war declared by the Culture to halt their expansion. Despite disliking their religion and ideology, Horza works for the Idirans because "they're on the side of life—boring, old-fashioned, biological life; smelly, fallible and short-sighted, God knows, but *real* life" (CP 29). The Culture is, in Horza's view, too dependent on the machines that run it, hence, in danger of becoming soulless. Horza himself is a Changer: a humanoid genetically altered to be used as a weapon in a forgotten war of the very distant past. He has poisonous glands under nails and teeth but his race is characterised, above all, by an ability to shift shapes at will, which might well be a jocular definition of Scottishness within Britain. Horza, in any case, conceals his racial origins because Changers are perceived as "a threat to identity, a challenge to the individualism even of those they were never likely to impersonate" (CP 46). There is no question, therefore, of his representing a nation or an ethnic group; he is, rather, the quintessential postmodern man in search of a stable identity, whether in Scotland or in other places of the Western world.

The Culture machines are at the centre of *Consider Phlebas*. The basic plot is provided by the Idirans' attempt to steal from the Culture a last-generation Mind that has escaped its wrecked spaceship. Horza is sent to retrieve this hidden treasure from Schar's World, but so are Perosteck Balveda—a formidable female Culture intelligence agent—and the fanatical Idiran warrior Xoxarle. The Mind is an AI (Artificial Intelligence) and is therefore regarded by the Culture as a citizen with full rights. A myriad of AIs like this, living in a symbiotic relationship with the humanoids, run the Culture. Horza's main criticism is that this so-called symbiosis is nothing but enslavement leading to extermination when the AIs realise they don't need the humanoids to survive. Considering the pampered life the citizens of the Culture lead, Horza comes to the conclusion that "the war had to be the Minds' idea; it was part of their clinical drive to clean up the galaxy, make it run on nice, efficient lines, without waste, injustice or suffering. The fools in the Culture couldn't see that one day the Minds would start thinking how wasteful and inefficient the humans in the Culture themselves were" (CP 35). The Culture is also, in his view, as imperialistic as the Idirans, despite exporting to the rest of the world their model of civilisation apparently for altruistic reasons; Horza even compares it to a cancer that "would not stop of its own accord, so it had to *be* stopped" (CP 159). Ironically, Horza becomes part of a Culture machine after dying. His mind, saved by Balveda, becomes the Mind ruling a Culture General Vehicle System, owned by one of her unsuspecting descendants.

In a sense, what defines *Consider Phlebas* best as Scottish science fiction—perhaps as, above all, European science fiction—is its uneasy relationship with the American models it admires but rejects. Certainly, Banks can be firmly placed within a tradition of Scottish fantasy writing, running from Burns to Gray as Colin Manlove did in *An Anthology of Scottish Fantasy Literature*. In this novel, Banks also resembles Stevenson's *Treasure Island*: *Consider Phlebas* carries Horza to the lonely, desert Schar's World where the Mind is hiding on board a pirate (space)ship run by a crew of misfits;

his own Long John Silver is the vicious pirate leader Krayklin, whom Horza eventually kills and impersonates. But as a writer of science fiction, Banks is responding to American models established by E. E. Smith, Jack Williamson, Robert Heinlein, Jack Vance and more recent writers. Some critics and readers have even read the Culture as a reflection of American consumerism, a connection an appalled Banks has often denied. The utopian Culture is not American if we consider its passion for cultured leisure rather than consumerism; it is, rather, European, as has been noted. But the model of peace the Culture is trying to impose on others to free them into utopia is not far from the US model of *Pax Americana*. Like contemporary Americans, the Culture uses war to stop the spread of other ideologies, such as that of the Idirans, while claiming to be striving for peace. *Consider Phlebas* actually deals with the contrast between the sheer scale of the war the Culture is waging on the Idirans and the short reach of Horza's protest — a protest that is transparently a European rejection of American nuclear-war policies. This is a war in which one can “obliterate planets from beyond their own system and provoke stars into novae from light-years off... and still have no idea why you were really fighting” (CP 33); echoes of Vietnam are perceptible here.

*Consider Phlebas* also holds a quite visible relationship with Hollywood cinema. The fast-paced editing of the narration is regulated by rules that blend the literary and the cinematic. As happens in many Hollywood films, the compulsion to visualise spectacular scenes is behind the tremendous energies employed here by Banks. The exhilarating visual and physical details involved in the narration outdoes *Star Wars*, and, indeed, any other American film. Banks himself has often noted he would love to see a film of *Consider Phlebas* but no Hollywood budget could cover a project like this. Banks's space opera is clearly filling a gap that the entertainment industry cannot fill otherwise. It only needs the recognition it deserves as literature from broad-minded readers; a recognition similar to that which Hollywood science-fiction films already enjoy among general film audiences. As regards the issue of Scottishness, whereas *The Wasp Factory* belongs rather to a paradigm still marked by the boundaries between national literatures, *Consider Phlebas* suggests that there is another paradigm at work. This, while articulated through the English language is truly international in scope, holding a close relationship with American texts exported and consumed worldwide. Within this framework, Banks's Scottishness is subordinated to his dual identity as mainstream and genre writer.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The M., standing for the family name Menzies, was not meant originally to distinguish his science fiction from the mainstream. It was rejected by Banks's first publishers and later used to appease his disappointed family.

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