

# FROM HETEROGLOSSIA TO WORLDMAKING: FICCTIONS OF ROBERT BURNS AND IAIN (M.) BANKS

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## ABSTRACT

The essay compares the fictions of individual and collective identity in the major works by Robert Burns, the tale *Tam O'Shanter* (1791) and the "cantata" *Love and Liberty* (1799, better known as *The Jolly Beggars*), with the representations of identity in the fictive worlds of sci-fi and non-sci-fi novels of Iain (M.) Banks. It discusses the importance of Bakhtin's paradigms of dynamic, heterogeneous structure ("heteroglossia" or "grotesque body") for the interpretation of Burns's poetry and the transformations of these paradigms in Banks's fictional "worldmaking" (Nelson Goodman). While Burns's poetry achieves a balance between dynamic representations of individual and collective identities (including Scottishness, Britishness and humanity), Banks's fictions problematize them. This especially influences Banks's "versions" of collective identities but also has a significant bearing on the individual identities of the protagonists.

## KEYWORDS

identity; fiction; Robert Burns; Iain (M.) Banks; heteroglossia

The title of this essay describes only one trajectory of my argument—the movement from the questions of representation, including those of referentiality and discourse (discussed, among others, in Bakhtin's writings on the novel), to the problems of fiction as a "worldmaking" activity, already discussed by Joseph Addison and elaborated by Nelson Goodman and more recently by Wolfgang Iser. The other and perhaps more important trajectory can only be expressed by a rather imperfect pun: "From a Comic to a Cosmic Opera." Robert Burns's posthumous "cantata" *Love and Liberty*, written in 1785, published in 1799 and known as *The Jolly Beggars*, has aptly been called "a miniature comic opera,"<sup>1</sup> while the voluminous science fiction novels of Iain M. Banks<sup>2</sup> are described by enthusiastic reviewers as "space opera[s] on the grand scale."<sup>3</sup>

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1. See John C. Weston, ed., *The Jolly Beggars: A Cantata*, by Robert Burns (Northampton, MA: Gehenna Press, 1963), quoted in Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), 592. All quotes from Burns's work follow this edition. Page references are in parentheses in the text.
  2. Banks uses his name with the middle initial only in his sci-fi writings.
  3. Lev Grossman, "A Night at the Space Opera," *Time*, February 29, 2008: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1718574,00.html>: "Banks writes space opera on the grand scale: he measures time in eons, space in light-years, tragedies in gigadeaths. His human players strut and fret on that vast stage, struggling to retain a sense of purpose."

The latter is a more exciting, as well as intriguing, level of argument, to which the representational, referential and—broadly speaking—structural problems of heteroglossia and fiction are mere conduits. On this level, the essay addresses dilemmas of collective identity which, in their specific form, are tentatively called “versions of Scottishness.” Importantly, in both the common idiom of romantic nationalism and the twenty-first-century discourses of globalization, these versions of cultural identity are closely related to what could be called the *versions of humanity*. Since the late eighteenth-century revolutions and emancipation movements, humanity has no longer been represented by the human nature of the Enlightenment, uniform, as Dr. Johnson put it, “from China to Peru,”<sup>4</sup> but by diverse ethnic or even multiethnic entities called nations.<sup>5</sup> Although these are believed to result from historical processes, they are also produced by what Michel Foucault has called “deployment of sexuality,”<sup>6</sup> including discourses of pleasure, desire, or “inclination” (as Burns names the supreme law of nature and society in *The Jolly Beggars*, 587).

More specifically, the second strand of this essay will follow the path leading from Burns’s *spontaneous* “we” to the *problematic*, morally indeterminate and potentially meaningless “we” of Banks’s galactic civilizations. Burns’s “we” often denotes a group of jovial cronies, who, as in *Tam O’Shanter* (1791), “sit bousing at the nappy / . . . feeling fou and unco happy” (263) and who, even as the social outcasts of *The Jolly Beggars*, may be said to form a collective “grotesque” body, a foundation of national identity. In contrast to this, the hybrid “we” of Banks’s fictions signifies innumerable intelligent living species hooked up to sophisticated, autonomous and infinitely more efficient machines. Obviously, the latter “we” carries us beyond the bodily or organic symbolism of collective identity and even beyond the confines of the empirical and moral universe: “We think we’re right . . . but we can never be sure . . . we deal in the moral equivalent of black holes, where the normal laws—the rules of right and wrong . . . break down.”<sup>7</sup> Despite their enormous difference, both these “we’s” are represented in the same traditional way: in relation to the individual identities of outsider heroes spelled out in their stories and also to the global framework of empires, no matter whether British or galactic. In *The Jolly Beggars*, the empire is represented by a catalogue of eighteenth-century British military pursuits in the Caribbean or in Portugal, and even *Tam O’Shanter* mentions “Five tomahawks wi’ blude red rusted; / Five scymitars wi’ murder crusted” (266),

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4. Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes: The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated* (London: Dodsley, 1749), 1.

5. For a detailed discussion of this issue see my “Romantic Revivals: Cultural Translations, Universalism, and Nationalism,” in *Cultural Learning: Language Learning: Selected Papers from the Second International British Studies Conference*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Martin Procházka (Prague: The British Council and Charles University, 1997), 75–89.

6. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 1:75–132.

7. Iain M. Banks, *Use of Weapons* (1990; New York: Orbit, 2008), 338. Hereafter cited in text as *UW*.

symbolizing the limits of British colonial expansion. And Banks's universe has a complex history of galactic empires, of which *The Culture* is the most prominent.

According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia is an intentional (as well as unintentional) parodic-travesty interaction of different discourses<sup>8</sup> productive of the novel or any dialogical work of art (Bakhtin also speaks about the "novelization" of poetry).<sup>9</sup> Burns's *Tam O'Shanter* is based on a "heteroglossia" of two folklore sources, two different ghost stories told about the ruined kirk of Alloway. One of them uses macabre details of a witches' sabbath—"simmering some heads of unchristened children, limbs of executed malefactors" (261)—for propaganda purposes: to show how everyone, when "fortified from above on his devout supplication," or merely by getting "courageously drunk," can resist the Devil and "his friends and emissaries" (261). The feat of the hero of the first tale is simple: "pouring out the damnable ingredients" (262) of the product of witchcraft and bringing the chief object of the devilish ceremony home as the evidence of the persistent danger of witchcraft practices. The second story is different: it decentralizes the devil, reducing him to a folk tradition figure of a "sooty blackguard master . . . keeping [the witches] alive with the powers of his bag-pipe" (262). The dominant feature of this tale is parodic laughter connected with sexual desire.<sup>10</sup> Fascinated by respectable women from his neighborhood romping about in their smocks and aroused by one with a very short shirt ("cutty sark"), the hero "was so tickled that he involuntarily burst with a loud laugh" (262).

Burns composes *Tam O'Shanter* to mediate between these two discourses: a didactic "tale o' truth," warning people against the "joys" of drinking and sex as dangerous excitements bought "o'erdear" (269) from demonic forces, and a multiple parody. The poem, for instance, inverts traditional religious and necromantic rituals: both are present in the folklore theme of the "spectral mass" celebrated before a congregation of the dead holding candles. High

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8. "[I]n ancient times the parodic-travesty world was (generically speaking) homeless. All these parodic-travesty forms constituted, as it were, a special extra-generic or inter-generic world. But this world was unified, first of all, by a common purpose, to provide a corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, styles, languages, voices; to force the men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not experienced in them. Such laughter paved the way for the impiety of the novelistic form. In the second place, these forms are unified by virtue of their shared subject: language itself, which . . . becomes in this new context the image of language, the image of the direct world. I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch." Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 59–60.
9. "The novelization of literature does not imply attaching to already completed genres a generic canon that is alien to them, not theirs. The novel, after all, has no canon of its own. . . . It is plasticity itself." Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 39.
10. "We find this tight matrix of death with laughter, with food, with drink, with sexual indecencies . . ." Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 198.

literary genres, such as the epic, are parodied by means of downgrading Homeric similes into comical scenes using low-style folklore images: "As open pussie's mortal foes / When pop! she starts before their nose" (268). Stylistic features of sentimental fiction or didactic poetry are treated ironically: "Ah gentle dames! it gars me greet / To think how mony counsels sweet, / How mony lengthen'd sage advices, / The husband from the wife despises!" (264); "But pleasures are like poppies spread, / You seize the flower, the bloom is shed; / . . . / Nae man can tether time or tide" (264). The well-known invocation "Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!" (265) mixes folk myth and conventions of heroic epic to subvert religious discourse: "Wi' usquabae we'll face the Devil!" (265). Apart from conventional ritual practices, genres and styles, Burns's parody also subverts patterns of male and female sexual behavior. The folklore narratives are "novelized" using a number of genres, from folk ballad to the contemporary mock epic or reflexive lyric, and also of diverse languages (a local dialect of Scots, English with occasional Scots words and contemporary intellectual English) and "multiple narrators of the story," including a drinking crony, as well as an educated contemporary poet.

The heteroglossia in *Tam O'Shanter* does not merely "novelize" folk narratives and traditional Classicist genres. It transcends the limits of literary language, towards what Bakhtin has called "the image of language, the image of the direct world,"<sup>11</sup> that is, towards a dynamic unity of referential, expressive and performative functions of language. This emancipates the speaker of the poem, who is no longer constricted by traditional identities and can mediate between the local Scottish village folk and the heterogeneous community of readers. In other words, the speaker can cross the boundaries of the individual self in a series of identifications and dis-identifications with the narrow, parochial "we" of the village community, which in Romanticism often becomes a model of the ethnocentric nation. By losing its particular identity, the narrator's self opens up to new dimensions of individual and social freedom. In contrast to Bakhtin's theory, whose framework is the necessity of "the time of labour . . . the collective battle of labour against nature,"<sup>12</sup> Burns's heteroglossia is a practice of emotional liberation, overcoming traditional religious associations of human sexuality with the demonic and establishing communication between culturally different social groups.

This tendency is more evident in *The Jolly Beggars* and is expressed even in the original title of the poem, *Love and Liberty*. Although some commentators try to make a neat distinction between the voice of the narrator speaking in "broad Scots" and the characters "singing in neo-classical English" (589), the heteroglossia of the poem is much more complex. For instance, even in the initial lines of the first "Recitativo," there are poeticisms typical of the neo-classical "high style" intermingled with Scots expressions: "When lyart leaves bestrow the yird / Or, wavering like a Bauckie-bird [bat], / Bedim could

11. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 60.

12. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 207.

Boreas' blast" (578). Compared with *Tam O'Shanter*, the heteroglossia in Burns's *Cantata* has a performative, rather than parodic, function. It may be said to produce a "grotesque body" no longer determined by mere resistance to the Christian repression of the flesh,<sup>13</sup> but by the desire for freedom, both political and sexual. In the song of the piper called "Poor Merry-Andrew," the "mountebank squad" of social outcasts and cripples from imperial wars competes in its capering with "the Premier," who can only "[m]ak faces to tickle the Mob" and who is no worse a buffoon (or "Tumbler") than any one of them (581). The heterogeneous grotesque body composed of humans of both sexes in various lovemaking postures, as well as, metonymically, of inanimate objects, such as the military paraphernalia—"[f]rom the gilded SPONTOON to the FIFE" (580)—attains full expression in the songs of the "BARD" drawing a fascinated crowd ("the glowran byke") "HOMER LIKE . . . / Frae town to town" (586). The "thunder of applause" (587) at the end of the Bard's song endorses his simple creed—"great love to a' the fair" and the defiance of all people of "lordly WILL" (586). It also authorizes his selfless subjectivity, having "no WISH but—to be glad, / nor WANT but" of a drink, and hating "nought but—to be sad" (586). As a result, the grotesque body performed by the Bard of Burns's poem is no longer a mere polemical representation of repressed corporeality but a new alternative community emerging after the disintegration of the First British Empire (the secession of the American colonies) and the decay of political life in the metropolis. Burns's alternative is a community of "Love and Liberty" ("LIBERTY's glorious feast"), whose only law is "INCLINATION" (587) understood both in the sentimentalist way as obeying spontaneous, "natural" impulses of pleasure and love, and in the Epicurean sense of following "your inclination as you will,"<sup>14</sup> with which Burns could have familiarized himself among freemasons.

As a consequence, the liberating gesture of Burns's heteroglossia is the reconstitution of society as a collective grotesque body. This collective does not repress individuals but integrates them on the basis of their "inclination" to pleasure and love, identified with the supreme natural law of "Life," which is immensely variegated and diverse, or, in Burns's phrase, "all a VARIORUM" (588). As a result, the ideal of a society which exists in keeping with the fundamental laws of nature is expressed in a non-idealistic way, as an endless

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13. "This new picture of the world is polemically opposed to the medieval world, in whose ideology the human body is perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife, while in the real-world practice, there reigned a crude and dirty physical licentiousness." Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 171.

14. "I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will, provided only that you neither violate the laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbours, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by one or more of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm." Epicurus, "Vatican Sayings, 51," in *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrine, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*, trans. Eugene O'Connor (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 80.

diversity of life holding the potential for emotional emancipation. The latter quality is evident in the only conflict of the poem, the clash between the aggressive and self-important “Tinkler,” a parasite of the powerful, taking “share, wi’ those that bear / *The budget and the apron!*” (585, Burns’s italics), and the “Fiddler,” who defeats his rival not only by sexual tricks or “shavies” (585) but chiefly by the “raptures” (586) of his songs.

The problems of heteroglossia, individual identity and freedom are also typical of the already voluminous *oeuvre* of the contemporary Scottish author Iain (M.) Banks, which includes eleven science-fiction volumes (ten novels and one collection of a novella and short stories, *The State of the Art*, 1991) and thirteen non-sci-fi novels, the former published under the name with the middle initial. Banks’s work is characterized by the convergence of its sci-fi and non-sci-fi tendencies, evident as early as in his first book, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), but manifest in the last novel, *Transitions* (2009), which takes place in recent history, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the attack on the World Trade Center, and whose protagonists cross the boundaries between parallel realities of quantum physics. It is not surprising that in the United States, the novel was published under the science-fiction name of the author, that is, with the middle initial.

The link between Burns and Banks is not so arbitrary as it may appear. Both authors connect heteroglossia with the questions of individual and collective identity, as well as with the issues of power, freedom and “inclination” as the supreme law. Both are vitally connected with popular culture, although at different imaginative levels: while Burns’s work draws from the folklore diction, rhythm and imagination, Banks bases his “space operas” on material from popular science fiction, including, for instance, the *Star Trek* series in *The State of Art*, Alfred Bester’s novel *The Stars My Destination* (1956 as *Tiger! Tiger!*) in his first sci-fi novel *Consider Phlebas* (1987) or H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in *Use of Weapons* (1990). His other sources are fantasy and mystery, including George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (from 1996) and David Anthony Durham’s novel *Acacia* (2007) in *Matter* (2008).<sup>15</sup> Similarly to Burns, who, in the preface to the Kilmarnock edition, refers to Theocritus and Virgil and proceeds to quote an eighteenth-century English author of natural and reflective lyric and landscape gardener, William Shenstone, as a “celebrated Poet whose divine Elegies do honour to our language, our nation and our species” (3–4), Banks combines influences from popular culture with those of mainstream literature: for instance, *Consider Phlebas* contains several allusions to the key passages of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (especially the sections entitled “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said”).<sup>16</sup> In spite of these resemblances, Banks

15. See Arachne Jericho, “Review: Iain M. Banks’ *Matter*,” *Tor.com*, May 8, 2009: [http://www.tor.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=blog&id=26946](http://www.tor.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=blog&id=26946).

16. On T. S. Eliot’s influence on Banks, see Gary Wilkinson, “Poetic Licence: Iain M. Banks’ *Consider Phlebas* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,” *Vector*, no. 203 (January/February 1999): 15–18.

differs from Burns in at least two main respects: he no longer builds on folklore imagination but develops a specific quality of fiction called “worldmaking”<sup>17</sup> based on the acknowledgement of the “relativity” of innumerable “alternative worlds,” which form what is called “reality.” According to Nelson Goodman:

[f]iction then . . . applies neither to nothing, nor to . . . possible worlds but, albeit metaphorically, to actual worlds. Fiction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction.<sup>18</sup>

Like Burns’s poetry, Banks’s fiction is deeply concerned with the problems of individual and collective identity and freedom, but Banks does not approach them as general human issues. Instead, he multiplies them in tales about different galaxies, civilizations and “worlds” (such as the mysterious artificial planet in *Matter* that includes fourteen concentric spheres). These stories are connected by at least two general themes, which, in Greek, could be called *agon* and *polemos*, the game and the war. The same topics are dominant in the science fiction novel *A History Maker* (1994) by Alasdair Gray, whose *Lanark* (1981) was an important influence on Banks’s first “hybrid” novel, *The Bridge* (1987). It can even be conjectured that *History Maker* responds, in a satirical and comic way, to some major sci-fi novels by Banks.<sup>19</sup>

Let us start with a discussion of the common features of Burns’s and Banks’s writings, especially the heteroglossia and the problems of individual and collective identities. In Chapter 4 of *The Wasp Factory* the main protagonist, after an excess of drinking, uses “correctly spoken English” as an inefficient attempt to get out of his stupor: “I had to pull myself together. I had to *communicate*.”<sup>20</sup> However, his only message—in intellectual English with tortuous syntax—is a strange account of his “misconception” connected with a local street name: associating “Union Street” erroneously with “the [socialist] acknowledgements of the worth of trade unions” (*WF*, 81) and not with the 1707 Act of Union, which marked the end of Scottish independence. Both allusions refer to the frustrating situation of Thatcherite Britain before Devolution. In contrast to Burns’s poetry, here the heteroglossia signifies the impossibility of communication, not only between the young generation, whose slogan used to be “no future,” and the rest of society, but even among young people themselves: “Dud he say sumhin er?” asks a girl who has been drinking with the protagonist. “I thought he was just clearing his throat,” says the protagonist’s friend Jamie (*WF*, 81). In another novel, *The Crow Road*, the contrast between the working-class dialect and educated English is used to problematize the British identity:

17. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 7–17 and *passim*.

18. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 21, 104.

19. On the link between Gray and Banks see, e.g., Dietmar Böhnke, “Shades of Gray: The Peculiar Postmodernism of Alasdair Gray,” in *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory and Culture*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 255–68.

20. Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (1984; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 81. Hereafter cited in text as *WF*.

'Ah ken that; but I mean they're British; they're ours.' 'Well I don't know about "ours", but they belong to Britain.' 'Ah'm British, am ah, no?' 'Hmm. I suppose so.' . . . 'But I don't see how you can call it yours; you don't even own your own house.'<sup>21</sup>

The response of another interlocutor to this exchange between a working-class boy and the son of a factory owner does not have any effect, although a third "intellectual" boy attempts to define Britishness as a common national identity, based on the political concept of representative democracy:

'It is the British Empire and we are all British, and when we're older we can vote for MPs to go to parliament, and they're in power, not the King; that's what the Magna Carta says; and we elect them, don't we? So it is our Empire, really, isn't it? . . . ' (CR, 149–50)

A similar failure is typical of another Bakhtinian feature of Banks's work, the "grotesque body" expressing collective identity. In *The Wasp Factory* the androgynous body of the main female protagonist is maimed by her/his father's crazy experiment, feeding the girl from an early age with male hormones. Her/his insane brother Eric finally appears as a "dancing" and "leaping" figure of a savage with an ax and a torch, surrounded by a flock of burning and wailing sheep (WF, 175). The protagonist thinks of herself/himself "as a state; a country or, . . . a city" where "the different ways" she/he feels "about ideas" are "like the differing political moods that countries go through." According to her/him, political life and representation "have more to do with mood, caprice and atmosphere than carefully thought-out arguments" (WF, 62). In this elusive world, thinks the protagonist, acts of cruelty and murder and "reprisals against people only distantly or circumstantially connected with those who have done others wrong are to make the people doing the avenging feel good." And she/he draws an obvious conclusion: "it's all to boost my ego, restore my pride and give me pleasure, not to save the country or uphold the justice or honour the dead" (WF, 63).

Even more repressive features of grotesque bodies can be found in the science fiction novels. In *Consider Phlebas* there is the monstrous fat body of Fwi-Song, the leader of an apocalyptic sect, "the Eaters," who are forced to feed on "ashes," "filth," "sand," "tree" and "grass."<sup>22</sup> The monster eats the flesh of aliens, and tortures his proselytes with a poisonous diet. Curiously enough, the purpose of his cruel practices appears to follow that of Burns's grotesque body: to keep the community linked with nature and to defy the power of institutions. However, instead of the freedom of natural "inclination," celebrated by Burns, the monstrous religious leader envisages the communion with nature in eating natural materials, including excrement (CP, 162). The cruel community of the Eaters is integrated by means of the cannibalism of the leader and the suffering of his followers and victims: "Let

21. Iain Banks, *The Crow Road* (London: Scribner, 1992), 149. Hereafter cited in text as CR.

22. Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (1987; New York: Orbit, 2008), 160. Hereafter cited in text as CP.



his pain be our delight, as our unmaking shall be our joining; let his flaying and satisfaction be our satisfaction and delectation!" (CP, 179).

In Banks's novels heteroglossia is superseded by "worldmaking." His fictional worlds are different "versions of the same facts"<sup>23</sup> about the human species. As Goodman points out, "Though we make worlds by making versions, we no more make a world by putting symbols together at random."<sup>24</sup> This "actuality" of "made" worlds is also typical of Banks's work. In *The Crow Road* the protagonist tells his young friends "how the sun and the solar system were made out of the remnants of older stars that had blown up; how the elements that made up the world had been made in those ancient stars, and that meant our bodies, too, every atom" and they think he is "going to explode" like a supernova (CR, 497). Nonetheless, Banks's worlds are "actual" not merely because of his gnoseological optimism—"we were stuck down here on this one little planet and still just savages really, but we'd glimpsed the workings of the universe, worked out from light and radiation what had happened over the past fifteen billion years . . ." (CR, 498)—but also because of his eminent interest in cultural and technological aspects of "worldmaking": in the problems named by Derrida "Structure, Sign and Play."<sup>25</sup>

The difference between the human mind and the artificial intelligence of cybernetic machines, "the minds" running, together with the humanoids, a heterogeneous galactic empire called The Culture, is not in the matter or spirit, but in organization. According to a "drone," an advanced robot talking to the protagonist of *Use of Weapons*, "the huge, slow cells of the animal [i.e., also human] brain . . . can claim themselves to be conscious, but would deny a quicker, more finely grained device of equivalent power" (UW, 331). The equality of humans and machines does not lie in their resemblance but rather in a set of structural and functional differences.

The closest resemblance between the two entities is in their capacity to play games. In Banks's second sci-fi novel, *The Player of Games* (1988), this is a central theme: games and their players represent different galactic civilizations: The Culture, as well as an autocratic, oppressive and cruel empire called Azad. However, they can never have a totalizing function: the Emperor of Azad, who uses the eponymous game to confirm his absolute power and to identify himself with the empire, is beaten by one of the best players of The Culture, who almost loses his identity in empathizing with his antagonist. The narrator of this novel is a machine, a member of a force called Special Circumstances (i.e., an elite body of humans and machines used by The Culture to intervene in dangerous situations). The "drone" asks a challenging question: "Does identity matter anyway?" and also answers it:

23. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 93.

24. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 94.

25. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93.

"We are what we do, not what we think. Only the interactions count. . . . And what is free will anyway? Chance. The random factor. If one is not ultimately predictable, then of course it's all it can be. I get so frustrated with people who can't see this!"<sup>26</sup>

These reflections cannot solve the recurring dilemma of individual identity. While in the novel no one doubts the identity of galactic civilizations, such as The Culture, the identity of Banks's protagonists is repeatedly in jeopardy. When "the Player of Games," Jernau Gurgeh, watches "the Clouds" (most probably the Magellanic Clouds, teeming with new-born stars), tears distort his vision. There is something unbearable in his loneliness, which is difficult to define, but has to do with his mortality, "a little dust" (*PG*, 390) he finds in his pocket. Others of Banks's characters are still worse off. Bora Horza Gobochul, the protagonist of *Consider Phlebas*, is able to change his identity: because of this he can survive the toughest skirmishes of the galactic wars. Nonetheless, he has to suffer the worst anxiety before his death, when he forgets his name. Overheard by the cybernetic machine, one of the Minds, the hero's name and story become the identity of a computer. The most disquieting case is Cheradenine Zakalwe, the protagonist of *Use of Weapons*, whose identity is split between that of "The Good Soldier" helping The Culture to influence and control potentially dangerous and aggressive civilizations, and of a mass murderer using, like the Nazis in their concentration camps, his sister's bones and skin as material for making a chair.

Zakalwe's split identity testifies to the resilience of a crucial Scottish theme, sometimes called antiszygy and explored by numerous writers, including James Hogg, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alasdair Gray or, recently, James Robertson. Banks's contribution to the debate on the Scottish predicament lies mainly in its new and variegated contextualization (including family chronicles, post-catastrophic tales or "space operas") and also in mingling mainstream and pop-culture influences, genres and techniques. However, unlike Burns's innovative *Cantata*, Banks's works no longer convey the optimistic message of harmony between "Love and Liberty" based on human "inclination." On the other hand, by mingling the themes of Scottish cultural memory (especially present in *The Crow Road*) with a space epic, Banks changes the frame of reference for Scottishness, linking it with a plurality of fictitious worlds, products of powerful and versatile imaginative activity. This may pose an alternative to a protracted crisis of political identity, emptying out the meaning of Britishness and threatening the breakdown of "the complex machinery of devolution."<sup>27</sup> But there may be—as Ascherson believes—still "another Britishness which will survive, a cultural intimacy of the kind which Robert Burns enjoyed and which—stripped of politics—will continue to enrich all the islanders of the British archipelago."<sup>28</sup>

26. Iain M. Banks, *The Player of Games* (1988; New York: Orbit, 2008), 291. Hereafter cited in text as *PG*.

27. Neal Ascherson, "What Was Britain? Scotland at the Tipping Point," *Litteraria Pragensia* 19, no. 38 (2009): 17.

28. Ascherson, "What Was Britain?," 19.

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