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## A New Dimension of Scottishness? Iain Banks, *The Algebraist* (2004)

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## **AN SSL DEBATE: SCOTLAND'S FAVOURITE BOOK?**

### **A New Dimension of Scottishness? Iain Banks, *The Algebraist* (2004)**

*The Algebraist* (2004) is a novel about the Dwellers, an extremely long-lived civilization, whose history encompasses most of the 14 billion years' existence of the universe. An earlier Banks novel, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), came in second in the BBC poll, but *The Algebraist* provides a better example of Banks's experimental science fiction.

Banks's novels, often disguised as the pop-culture genre of "space opera," change the frame of reference for Scottishness, linking it with a plurality of fictitious worlds in the hybrid settings of the "multiverse." According to a leading scholar in cultural studies, Banks's Culture and other SF novels "engage with moral and social concerns, which can ... be related to Scottish culture and society."<sup>1</sup>

An important aspect of Banks's Scottishness is an ironical response to Enlightenment-shaped utopian or dystopian projects, represented by Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and *A History Maker*. Banks subverts the utopian image of The Culture as a superior civilization characterized by inclusivity and overabundance.

Banks's SF novels develop a specific capability of fiction called "worldmaking" and are based on the assumption of the relativity of innumerable "alternative worlds" which form what is called "reality."<sup>2</sup> This characterizes a novel called *Transition* (2009), described as a synthesis of Banks's SF and non-SF writing. Using his perspectivism, which combines actual and virtual dimensions of reality (e.g., in a novel entitled *Fearsum Endjinn*, 1994), Banks does not see culture determined by

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Middleton (1999:6), quoted by Simone Caroti, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978), 7-17.

its opposition to nature but emerging out of human relation to entropy (e.g., in *Excession*, 1996).<sup>3</sup>

Banks's representations of The Culture can be interpreted as interfaces between diverse anthropomorphic and anthropocentric notions of cultures and their deconstructive representations. *The Algebraist* mocks the efforts of modern science to systemize knowledge on the cosmic scale. Its strange title invoking mathematical formalization surprisingly refers to an ancient fragmentary poem describing a number of events in the earlier history of the universe. It is believed that the missing books of the poem contain the so-called Dweller List, a key to the secret system of wormholes connecting numerous locations in the universe and making possible fast intergalactic travel, inevitable for a good functioning and an efficient defence of galactic empires.

The most exciting feature of Banks's novel is the gradual erosion, subversion and deconstruction of the anthropomorphic perspective. In the epilogue, the narrator is revealed as a non-human, eight-limbed being, kept in a typical subaltern position by a humanoid protagonist, the "seer" Fassin Taak, prophesying that one day all living beings will be free.

Banks's representations of The Culture as an immense multiplicity of mobile diasporas (spaceships of different sizes and purposes, planets, orbitals and habitats, populated by humanoids and other intelligent beings as well as by drones and complex cybernetic systems called the Minds) keeps its attraction in the present time, when the fear of migration causes the escalation of xenophobia and nationalism. Confronted with their violence, Banks's fiction reveals the limitations of humanist ideologies and emphasizes pragmatic aspects, uses and benefits of cooperation among widely different living beings and intelligent machines.

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<sup>3</sup> Banks's position can be compared with that of Wolfgang Iser in *Kultur: ein emergentes Phänomen* (*Culture: an Emergent Phenomenon*) (Siegen: University of Siegen, 2004).