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Reading Double, Writing Double:
the fiction of Iain (M.) Banks
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Iain Banks' writing can be located within a context of contemporary British fiction, namely the period after 1970. The rationale for the provision of a context wider than Scottish fiction is determined by Banks who, as Thom Nairn explains, has 'expressed doubts about the place he may or may not occupy in a specifically Scottish literary tradition, as well as some dubiety about Scottish literature itself.'¹ In an interview with James Robertson in *Radical Scotland*, Banks claims that:

I don't really know enough about Scottish literature, so I'm very dubious about saying "Yes, I'm part of this tradition". I'm certainly part of the English language tradition. I've been a lot more influenced by *Catch 22*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Tin Drum*, and almost anything by Kafka, than by anything in Scottish literature apart from the single exception of *Lanark*. [...]²

The reluctance to define his oeuvre and his own authorial status within a specific region or nation is the reflection of a novelist whose influences range from the Transatlantic to the European and South American.

A writer whose work transgresses ideas of genre and form, Iain Banks publishes two different styles of novel: popular, commercial fictions that often focus on postmodern Gothic transformations of the thriller genres, and works of scientific or speculative fiction which are often set in his critical Utopia, *The Culture*. These two different outputs are published under different names, Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks respectively. Banks, then, is a novelist who has his own 'double', an author for whom the idea of a split writing persona is emphatically not out of place.

The space between is often bridged and the differentiation between the two is overcome by the frequent overlaps and intertextual references that exist within the different novels.

The presentation of the double within Banks' work is reinforced by Nairn who claims that:

potential schisms in the individual (schisms are piled on schisms of all kinds) are constantly present in Banks's fiction, making it comparable to R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and James Hogg's *Confessions* or *The House with the Green Shutters*, or Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*.³

Overall, Iain Banks' oeuvre represents a nexus of different authorial strategies and practices within post-1970s British fiction. To reinforce and expand this, echoing Nairn's statement, Banks also writes fiction which is influenced by two foundational Scottish texts: James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). According to Karl Miller, the figure of the double is 'the most potent [...] of Scottish Gothic [...]' which he claims 'stands at the start of that cultivation of uncertainty by which the literature of the modern world has come to be distinguished.'⁴ These essences and symbols of the Gothic, with its fracturing and doubling, and the problematic perspectives offered by the narrators in these texts, are also connected to a more general aspect of Scottish culture: 'the Caledonian antisyzygy', a term originally applied by C. Gregory Smith to highlight the 'characteristic yoking together of realism with fantasy in Scottish textual practice'⁵, particularly pertinent to the narrative strategies of Hogg and Stevenson. The fusion of realism and fantasy is just one of the techniques which Banks has come to employ with commercial and critical success and it characterises the overlaps between the different genres he operates in.

Not content with this, Banks regularly blurs the boundaries between 'fantasy' and 'realism' in his novels, to the extent that often the reader is struggling to differentiate between the two: a strategy which, Gavin Wallace suggests, 'is a source of concern and puzzlement to newer, younger critics, but it would be difficult to deny the continuing relevance of the fundamental issues of contradictoriness and paradox to the Scottish imagination.'⁶ Contradiction and paradox are two significant aspects of Banks' perception of his own craft as a novelist, as evidenced in his interviews where he (self-effacingly) distances himself from suggestions he is a 'literary' writer but then structures his novels in forms which openly display the attributes popularly associated with works of 'literature'.

The recurrent presentation of different forms of doubles and doubling provides a rationale for focusing on Banks' more 'mainstream' novels. The strongest case for Banks' bridging of genres and his eclectic inhabitation of the double domains of the high and low/popular and literary is to be made through an examination of his non-science fiction work. As Nairn suggests, 'his work outside the science fiction field (though rarely far from its edges) is his most interesting'⁷

In the wide-ranging corpus that is contemporary fiction, Iain Banks' status as a non-canonical author is significant, particularly given the difficulty of locating him within a singular genre or form. As a wildly innovative, imaginative, popular and subversive novelist, his works are infused with darker elements that give them a forbidden, cultish, underground status, but the fictions that are perceived as being in his more conventional and less evidently speculative mode fail to achieve recognition through awards and prizes – perhaps because of that transgressive streak and the two different forms he writes in.

Iain Banks as a novelist whose authorial practice and presentation of identity are oriented around the structuring principle of the Double, which seems an appropriate image for an author who has gained success under two names and whose work is highlighted for its consistent bridging of gaps between the "high" and the "low", the "popular" and the "literary". Popular fiction is a genre of fiction perpetually on the periphery of academic acceptance that revels in its capacity for insurrection and parody. It is most generally a product of, and representative of, the contemporary cultural climate, and explodes the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture whilst engaging in a continuous dialogue with the established literary canon. Reinforcing this intersection between the popular and literary, Duncan Petrie claims that Banks is a novelist 'whose *oeuvre* is distinguished by the integration of an engagement with the traditional concerns of literary fiction – contemporary subjectivity, politics and society – and a more self-conscious exploration of formal issues such as narrative technique, authorship and the conventions and limits of genre.'⁸ The sense of hybridity in Banks' work reflects the ways in which he successfully moves between genres, and is able to blend different strategies whilst retaining his popular appeal and the loyalty of his readership. Thom Nairn concurs, claiming that 'A further asset is Banks' fascination with the nature of stories themselves, and how and why they are told.

Equally, his repeated focus on time and the tricks it can play occupies an important role in establishing narrative structures and facilitating the range of forms they take in his work.'⁹

A substantial proportion of Iain Banks' work is devoted to subverting and undermining the particular expectations of his audience. Genre fiction is perceived as having to conform to a series of 'laws' or 'regulations' in order to achieve commercial success. Genre is a self-reflexive entity and this is particularly true of the genres that Banks operates in most successfully: Gothic, crime fiction and political thriller. In the context of Banks' novels, the overlaps between genres add layers of sophistication to narratives and plotlines that are already impressive in their complexity.

The scope of Banks' output under two different names positions him as outlandish in his somewhat cavalier approach to writing and with this, he is unafraid to shamelessly reconfigure, transport and transform other authors' ideas into his novels. Cairns Craig's gambit in *Complicity: A Reader's Guide*, is a welcome framework and an effective analogy for Banks' authorial practice as a whole. Craig suggests that 'Genre is one of the defining elements of the game of literature. [...] Iain Banks is a player of games with the rules of fiction, not just because, unusually, he writes both "serious" novels and science fiction, but because all of his novels, in either mode, are explorations of the possibilities of combining or disrupting the expectations of particular genres'.¹⁰ By highlighting the importance of genre, Craig connects the variety of Banks' novels with an allusion to the split personae or doubling that ensures his authorial technique differentiates him from many of his contemporaries, and supports one of the overarching arguments of this thesis.

In Banks' case a new critical formulation is required if the assessment of this popular writer is to avoid generalisation or ineffectiveness. Such a language, to quote Scott McCracken, 'ask[s] about the kinds of values a particular audience has a vested interest in creating or sustaining' as well as identifying the contribution made by such fiction in maintaining the permeability of different cultural boundaries.¹¹

In her monograph, *Literary Value/Cultural Power*, Lynnette Hunter surveys different arguments concerning the many definitions for "literature" and identifies one recurrent idea as being 'that it uses language in a way that is different from the familiar; hence "popular writing" is not literature because it plays towards convention often because the writer needs to

make money.¹² One of the overt criticisms directed towards popular fiction is its requirement for a formulaic structure of characters, plot and narrative, which typically perpetuates a repetitious, mass-produced text lacking in depth and originality. However, this overlooks a potential for (since most popular fiction does not destabilise) the different forms of subversion, parody and carnival that contravene the conventions of genre fiction; language, particularly the use of the vernacular, is one such method for introducing instability.

The appropriation of language is important in terms of identity formation and both of these are significant qualities in Banks' work – particularly his use of different experimental forms of language representation, most prominent in *Feersum Endjinn* and *The Bridge*. Scott McCracken makes a strong claim for the use of language as oppositional force, suggesting that:

A theory of transgression [...] draws attention to popular culture's roles in struggles over meaning. [...] In order to provoke a widespread interest, the text must, at some level, breach the bounds of that acceptability. It must, in other words, challenge social standards and norms.¹³

Iain Banks' literary oeuvre can be seen as a continuous celebration of the transgressive, through fiction that firmly acknowledges the rules and then promptly breaks them. With a mordant wit, a furious pace of narrative that ranks with the best thriller writers and an acute awareness of the contemporary, Banks' relentless witticisms, cerebral wordplay and tangential asides leave the reader unsettled and overwhelmed. A key feature of Banks' writing which ensures his cultish status is his desire to shock. *Song of Stone* and *The Bridge* are heavily involved with the violence and sexuality of subconscious and primary human impulses; *Complicity* is an ultra-violent, outraged scream against Thatcherism; and *Dead Air* deals with those who hold power over others, be that sexual, intellectual, financial or political.

Banks' work represents a new generation of writers who, after Malcolm Bradbury, Kingsley Amis and Anthony Burgess, are experimental, overtly politicised and keen to destabilise distinctions between the "popular" and the "literary". Furthermore, Banks is one of the formidable figures in the flourishing period of contemporary literature, inviting comparison with contemporary novelists such as James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Ian Rankin, Irvine Welsh, Alastair Reynolds, Ken MacLeod, Hal Duncan, M. John Harrison (for whom Banks wrote the

introduction to *Viriconium*), Ron Butlin and Duncan McLean.

The Wasp Factory Phenomenon, or "How I Broke into Writing"

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Banks revealed that he submitted *The Wasp Factory* novel to McMillan because they had also published Martin Amis and Ian McEwan and "I thought my work was in a similar vein to this".¹⁴ Significantly though, Banks' and James Robertson's comments regarding *The Wasp Factory* and its shift in status from 'popular' to 'literary' are revealing in their perceptions of responses to contemporary fiction:

JR: There's also a division between what's literary and what's popular – the same sort of idea as cutting off science fiction because it's to do with engineering or something. Even the books that get published nowadays in paperback, the crap stuff is in A format and the snooty stuff is in B format.

IB: *The Wasp Factory* actually went from one to the other!¹⁵

The Wasp Factory's status as a novel which garnered its place in the canon over a long period is significant because even the earlier reviews noticed dimensions in the text which are present in Banks' later writing. The movement from much-maligned to re-assessed brilliancy is indicative of the then pejorative attitudes of the British book reviewing community and the imposition of their own value system in relation to 'non-literary' fiction. Positive observations emerged from *The Irish Times* who stated that 'there is no denying the bizarre fertility of the author's imagination: his brilliant dialogue, his cruel humour, his repellent inventiveness'¹⁶ but, as well as highlighting the problems and erratic qualities which one associates with Banks' writing, a substantial amount of the critical attention, indicated by the excerpts from reviews printed in the 1990 paperback edition of the book, does acknowledge the talent and originality of the novel. Praise comes from *The Daily Telegraph* who enthuse that '[H]is study of an obsessive personality is extraordinary, written with a clarity and attention to detail that is most impressive' and *Punch* claim that '[T]here is something foreign and nasty here, an amazing new talent.'¹⁷

The marketing strategy plays upon the idea that a novel this poor must surely have been misjudged or misread. When questioned by John Mullan, Banks wryly admitted that friends who purchased later editions of the novel (from which the negative reviews were excised)

asked 'where all the reviews had gone'¹⁸ – but there are also perceptive comments which have been levelled at novels written throughout his career. *The Scotsman* shrewdly states that 'it could not be said that the violence is casual or unnecessary' and the *Mail on Sunday* notes '[y]ou can hardly breathe for fear of missing a symbol'.¹⁹ This is vital in understanding Banks' cultivation of his profile as a self-fashioning novelist, whose construction of his populist novels is informed by a ferocious intelligence and conscious awareness of the technical aspects of his authorial practice.

Brian Aldiss suggests in his view of science fiction, which I feel can be applied to Banks' more mainstream fiction as well, that 'the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould'.²⁰ The 'Gothic' quality of Banks' science fiction is similar to the tone of many texts, including *The Wasp Factory*, *Complicity*, *Song of Stone* and *The Crow Road*, which – with the narrative clashes between primitive and civilised, social and barbaric, decadent and conservative – are redolent of the ongoing conflicts between the Culture and its neighbours. With this in mind it is worth noting that, when Banks' *oeuvre* as a whole is considered, there are forms of Gothic or Victoriana that are consistently being transformed or reconfigured from existing paradigms into a contemporary context.

To locate Banks within a cultural context, it is necessary to return to 1969, when David Lodge proposed that the 'English novelist' stood at a crossroads, with the choice of fabulation or experimental metafiction. He suggested that the novel remain faithful to realism and a liberal ideology.²¹ It is significant that Lodge identified this choice as being that of the 'English novelist' as opposed to the 'British novelist'. The 'realism' and 'liberal ideology' suggested by Lodge has been thankfully corrupted by a focus on the more challenging deviances, addictions and dirty realism emerging in the context of the late 1970s Thatcherite culture. As Alan Rich comments in his essay "Orphans and Their Ancestors in Popular Scottish Fiction", 'Banks's *oeuvre* is entirely the era of Margaret Thatcher and John Major: Conservative Party rule in the United Kingdom'²² and this firmly locates the political context for a novelist whose own left-wing invective has also become a prominent aspect of his writing.

In his assessment (or assassination) of the writing of the 1970s, *The Situation of the*

Novel, Bernard Bergonzi claims that 'in literary terms, as in political ones, Britain is not a very important part of the world today'.²³ In his more recent survey of contemporary literature, *Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*, Dominic Head claims that:

Bergonzi's appraisal set the tone for critical discussion throughout the 1970s, the decade that is generally held to embody the nadir of British fiction, since the deleterious effect on publishing, and on the range of fiction that found an outlet; but from the longer perspective of literary history (and we may just be able to glimpse this now) it is hard to see how even the 1970s will go down as a period of suppressed creativity. On the contrary, this was the decade which saw the publication of important novels by Iris Murdoch, John Fowles, J.G. Farrell, and David Storey, among others. It also witnessed the first books by Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.²⁴

The contrast here is between the immediacy of Bergonzi's withering and pessimistic assessment and the longer, arguably more considered critical reception that has been afforded and to the early novels of Amis and McEwan. Head's use of the term 'suppressed creativity' also draws attention to the co-dependent relationships between the publishing industry, the writers emerging during the 1970s and the political intervention and influences at work which led to the varying pronouncements about the effects on British 'culture'. Head argues further:

It is, consequently, possible to overstate the importance of Thatcherism as political philosophy, since the state of the nation, as well as developing global trends, facilitated its success. Nevertheless, the changes to British society and culture were dramatic, generating a spirit of either adventurous entrepreneurship or deplorable avarice, depending on your point of view. Novelists tended to take the latter view, lamenting the imminent collapse of the welfare state, and a new era of inequality and social division.²⁵

These dramatic changes were reflected in equally startling developments in contemporary fiction, where innovation and experimentation became prominent and the political conditions of the time proved incredibly fertile for the next generation of novelists to thrive in and, like Banks himself, respond to with immediacy and urgency. Significantly, Head's survey does not make any reference to Banks' work and his omission from a substantial number of other scholarly surveys in contemporary writing makes this more noticeable.

Of the major sources used for this thesis, Banks occurs more frequently in academic texts focusing on the Gothic or Scottish literature and culture, suggesting either academic pigeonholing at work or that he is simply vastly underestimated in the formation of the contemporary canon. Critics such as Jago Morrison (*Contemporary Fiction*), Phillip Tew (*The Contemporary British Novel*) and Rod Mengham (*An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*) all fail to mention Banks' debut or the longevity of his career and he only receives scant attention in Tew's Second Edition to *The Contemporary British Novel* because of *Dead Air* and the inclusion of a problematic section concerning the 9/11 novel and 'the traumatological'. By contrast, critics such as Tim Middleton, Cairns Craig, Duncan Petrie, Gavin Wallace, David Punter and Victor Sage acknowledge key texts within Banks' *oeuvre* as contributing to their respective genres and national traditions. In conversation with Will Self, J. G. Ballard commented that 'a lot of British fiction is too rooted. The writers are too comfortable'²⁶ and this is another reason why, of the McEwan, Amis and Banks trio, only Iain Banks can be considered to have remained true to his original cultish status, despite achieving stellar sales figures.

Banks' assessment of his role as a writer differs from his approach to the practice of contemporary fiction. In his playful lambasting of reviewers and the critical reception of his novels, Banks claims that his commercial success must mean his books are substandard – yet there is an overt and self-conscious craft about the complexities of his work which acts in opposition to this assumed lack of quality. The distinction is reinforced by his ability to maintain a narrative pace with this sophistication in his writing, sustaining the readers' interest but also challenging and unsettling their expectations.

By contrast with the literary pretensions of his contemporaries, Banks is shamelessly forthcoming about his reputation as a devil-may-care writer whose attitude to the practice and craft of writing is both erratic and cavalier, but despite his phenomenal success, Banks maintains a self-deprecating view of the importance of his own literary output. Following the publication of *Dead Air* in 2002, Banks revealed that 'I assumed that if you were a good writer then you didn't sell very well, and if you were a rubbish writer you sold bucketloads – so I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm a rubbish writer.'²⁷ Far from reinforcing the serious image of the author as an austere, intellectual artist whose *oeuvre* embodies their

philosophies, values and imaginations, Banks deliberately problematises the question of his role as a writer, as demonstrated when he was interviewed about the events of September 11th 2001:

From a horribly selfish point of view, I'm glad I wasn't writing a book when it happened. [...] No matter how wonderfully intellectual your book might be, in a sense you're just part of the entertainment industry – well reviewed novels are just entertainment for people who went to Oxbridge, if you want to be really pejorative about it.²⁸

In an earlier interview with *The Guardian*, Banks was asked about his views on the subject of contemporary fiction and responded accordingly:

I love plot, I love stories. I hate these novels that just stop. I think, "Hello? What happened? Did they run out of words?" People seem to think that that's a clever way to end novels. Well, I don't think it's good enough. I want closure, I don't want any of this post-modern shite, pal. I want a story, with an ending.²⁹

These are the opinions of a writer who is unquestionably a wonderful raconteur, who lets his imagination run wild but who still appears to retain a predominantly traditional attitude to the conventions of the novel. His dismissal of 'post-modern shite' is a contradiction, though, given his use of metafictional devices and the frequent multiple narratives which vie for dominance in his novels. Such inconsistencies stimulate significant interest in Banks' work and also reinforce the importance of examining his destabilising narrative conventions and propensity for mixing the literary and the popular.

Notes

- 1 Thom Nairn, "Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory" in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds.) *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993) p. 129.
- 2 James Robertson, "Bridging Styles: A conversation with Iain Banks", *Radical Scotland* 42 (December 1989/January 1990), pp. 26-27.
- 3 Nairn, p. 129.
- 4 Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford University Press, 1985) p.viii.
- 5 Tim Middleton, "Constructing the Contemporary Self: The Works of Iain Banks" in Tracey Hill and William Hughes (eds.) *Contemporary Writing and National Identity* (Sulis Press, 1995) p.20.
- 6 Stevenson and Wallace, p.218.
- 7 Nairn, p.127.
- 8 Gordon Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fiction: Film, Television and the Novel* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004) p.119.

- 9 Nairn, p.134.
- 10 Cairns Craig, *Complicity: A Reader's Guide* (Continuum, 2002).
- 11 Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester University Press, 1998) p.5.
- 12 Lynette Hunter, *Literary Value/Cultural Power: Verbal Arts in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester University Press, 2001) p.13.
- 13 McCracken, p.18.
- 14 John Mullan podcast interview with Iain Banks for *The Guardian* 18 July, 2008.
- 15 Robertson, p.26.
- 16 *Ibid.* x.
- 17 *Ibid.* x.
- 18 Mullan *The Guardian* 18 July, 2008.
- 19 Robertson, x.
- 20 Brian W. Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p.8.
- 21 Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction 1950-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 6.
- 22 Alan Riach, "Nobody's Children: Orphans and their Ancestors in Popular Scottish Fiction after 1945" in Susanne Hagemann (ed.) *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* (Peter Lang, 1996) p.68.
- 23 Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (Macmillan, 1979) pp. 56-7.
- 24 Head, p. 7
- 25 *Ibid.* p.30.
- 26 Will Self, *Junk Mail* (Penguin Books Ltd, 2004) p. 29.
- 27 (Banks 2002: 5)
- 28 Libby Brooks, "The Word Factory", in *The Guardian: Books*, 26 August, 2002, p. 4
- 29 Colin Hughes, "Doing the Business," in *The Guardian*, 7 August, 1999, p. S6.



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