Abstract

The aim of this paper is to use cognitive approach in order to analyse the topic of religion in two novels by Iain Banks. I argue that in both *The Wasp Factory* and *Consider Phlebas* Banks presents divine thoughts as cognitively natural for humans, since, according to neuroscience, the propensity for religiosity is inborn and universal. Banks’s novels show that people have an innate need to fill space with agents, and cannot refrain from ascribing illusory purpose to the cruel chaos of the surrounding world.

Contemporary investigations into the neurobiology of cognition deal not only with the workings of human mind itself, but also examine the mind’s products, such as, for instance, literary fiction, religion, science or technology. Academics write extensively about the biological foundations of the idea of god and the psychology of scientific thinking. Recently, many attempts at breaching the divide between humanities and science are being made by scholars and philosophers such as, for instance, Antonio Damasio, Catherine Malabou or Edward Slingerland. Literature is, finally, analysed from the perspective of biology and cognitive science, since it deals with human mentality, as well as influences both the reader’s mind and his body. Thus, in this article I apply a cognitive perspective towards two novels which are, in my opinion, concerned with the topic of human predilection for religious thinking. Scientists argue that religion is no longer the simple choice of believing or non-believing: the border between the sacred and the profane seems not to exist, since religion proves not to be a *sui generis* sphere, or a utilitarian invention that one can dispose of on a whim. According to Robert McCauley, religious thinking is universal and belongs to the natural faculties of the brain\(^1\) (3).

In my analysis I focus upon the first mainstream novel by Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and *Consider Phlebas* (1987), the first speculative fiction novel by Iain M. Banks.\(^2\) Although these two works belong to separate literary genres, they both, in my opinion, extensively deal with the same topic: that is,
the nature of religious thinking. Banks’s ouvre is a merger of mainstream and science fiction, and he himself always regarded these two dimensions of literary work as more or less equally important. “I try to bring the same skill to both […] I enjoy writing the science fiction more, not tremendously more. In some ways, the mainstream stuff, for want of a better word, is slightly more rewarding by exactly the same fraction,” states Banks himself (Wilson), while Ken MacLeod, Banks’s friend and fellow science-fiction author, writes:

Iain always insisted that he brought the same imagination to bear on his mainstream works as he did on his SF, and that conversely he lavished the same craft and care on his SF as he did on his literary fiction. The only difference, he said, was in the setting and scale. He likened writing literary fiction to playing a piano, and writing SF to playing a vast church organ. (MacLeod)

Thus, *The Wasp Factory* and *Consider Phlebas* are the “starting points of parallel lines of writing” (Alegre 198), and my choice of these two novels is, therefore, motivated by the wish to show that even though “the setting and the scale” of the narratives are different, they complement each other as far as the ideas expressed in them are concerned.

*The Wasp Factory* has already been analysed as a Gothic novel, as it has also been broadly discussed from the perspective of gender studies. The theme of religion seems, however, to be less investigated in the context of *The Wasp Factory*, and Sara Martin Alegre suggests that it is of utmost importance, since Banks is “taking religion much more seriously than the tone of other aspects of this novel suggests” (202). While *Consider Phlebas* has been read as a space-opera or a critical utopia referring to the topic of conflict between the secular and the religious, not much critical attention has been paid to the presentation of religious thinking itself. Therefore, in my article I propose a new approach toward these two novels, which, in my opinion, are both concerned with the themes of religion’s innateness and ubiquity.

*The Wasp Factory* is narrated from the perspective of Frank Cauldhouse, a teenager living on a small, secluded island together with his father, Angus, who is a scientist suffering from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder. The story begins when Frank learns that his mad elder brother, Eric, escaped from the asylum and is on way home. While the novel unfolds against the backdrop of Eric’s inevitable arrival, the reader learns the story of the main protagonist. Frank was in his early childhood mauled by Saul, his father’s beloved dog, and was consequently left severely impaired, with his genitals bitten off and impossible to reconstruct. Frank has no birth certificate and is home-schooled, so he mostly spends time on the island: killing animals (and people), as well as developing a personal religion which consists of complex, cruel rituals. He blasts rabbit colonies with cordite, keeps birds’ heads impaled on stakes (proudly called
‘The Sacrifice Poles’), and in a post-World War II bunker uses Saul’s skull to make telepathic contact with Eric. But Frank’s greatest creation is the Wasp Factory: a device comprising of a huge glass-encased clock and corridors aligned with each number on the clock’s face. When a wasp is placed inside the Wasp Factory it walks down one of the corridors seeking its way out. It will not survive, however: each of the corridors has a deadly trap at the end, so that a sacrificial wasp may die in flames, perish bitten by a spider, be eaten by a Venus fly-trap or meet other equally terrible ends. Frank uses the Wasp Factory to predict the future and to answer questions of ultimate concern. As the novel progresses, the reader learns the truth about main protagonist: surprisingly, he is a girl. The story about Saul’s ferocious attack was invented by Angus, a mad scientist who subjected his daughter Francis to chemical treatment in order to make her male. Angus hated women, therefore he made Francis/Frank hate them too – and, as a consequence, believe in an illusion of boyhood.

While *The Wasp Factory* is set in an almost microscopic realm, *Consider Phlebas* belongs to the science fiction sub-genre of space opera, and deals with the vastness of whole universe. The novel introduces the Culture, which consists of a loose federation of intelligent, humanoid species inhabiting thousands of galaxies. The Culture shapes itself as a non-imperialistic, peaceful, secular, absolutely self-sufficient society. It is run by technology: from sentient, powerful Minds governing the Culture, through helpful, commonplace drones, to omnipresent electronic gadgets. In *Consider Phlebas*, the Culture stays in a state of war with the Idirans, who are an ancient, warmongering and pious species. The novel’s main protagonist is Bora Horza Gobuchul, a human working for the Idirans due to his abhorrence of the Culture. Horza holds that he is on the side of life, messy and violent as it is, because for him, the rule of the machines (even sentient ones) is against nature. He claims that people deprived of experiencing loneliness, scarcity and pain lack their humanness (Banks 26–29). Concerning plot itself, the novel deals with Horza being tasked with the retrieval of the fugitive Mind, which escaped from an Idiran attack and stays hidden on a neutral planet called the Schar’s World. Suffice it to mention that Horza does not succeed, finally becoming himself a small cog in one of the sentient machines.

In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank’s island is likewise the world of animated matter: catapults live “breathing with you, moving with you, ready to leap” (27–28), a kite “slices its tail and flexes its hollow bones” (91), and the sea is a personified being purposefully waging war against the protagonist (43). As soon as in the second sentence of his monologue, Frank admits that the Factory “told” him that something was going to happen (7). This might be associated with what Deborah Kelemen and Jesse Bering call “promiscuous teleology” – the propensity for over attributing agency to objects (Kelemen 295–301 & Bering 253–262), which is a widespread tendency among children, who “only slightly more readily than their elders in their own incautious ruminations, presume
design intentionally imposed on things throughout their natural surroundings” (McCauley 220). From an early age, people want to see things happening for a reason rather than as the result of chance. Likewise, Frank Cauldhame creates a purpose for anything taking place in his vicinity. As a compensation for living a lonely and secret life without any responsibilities, plans, or what could in general be called “goals,” Frank imagines himself as a powerful young man, the sole proprietor of knowledge about things as crucial as, for instance, the reasons behind his brother’s insanity:

The first Mrs Cauldhame, Mary, who was Eric’s mother, died in childbirth in the house. Eric’s head was too big for her; she haemorrhaged and bled to death on the marital bed back in 1960. Eric has suffered from quite severe migraine all his life, and I am very much inclined to attribute the ailment to his manner of entry into the world. The whole thing about his migraine and his dead mother had, I think, a lot to do with What Happened To Eric. Poor unlucky soul (Banks 23).

Frank ascribes to things not only agency, but also intentions and sentience. The Wasp Factory “tells” him things, while sometimes it “does not want the wasp in its first choice of corridor, and lets it crawl back out on to the face again” (121). Robert N. McCauley notes it grants mental comfort to perceive inanimate things as agents understanding us (81), while Daniel Dennett mentions everyday instances of appeasing cars, cursing computers or intimidating kitchenware as the evidence for the universal biological urge to treat objects as agents possessing their own desires and beliefs (116–117). Creating deities is a natural consequence of such tendencies in human cognition (Slone 120) – it all begins with equipping an agent with counterintuitive properties, and then, a talking tree, an immortal man, or an omniscient machine naturally crops up:

Because every normal human being is susceptible to such emotionally compelling cognitive misfires, every culture has emerged with collections of either ancestors or angels, demons or devils, ghosts or ghouls, or gods or golems possessing counterintuitive properties (McCauley 159).

Many scientists agree that people are intuitive theists, in that mental tools such as the Agency Detection Device (ADD) and the Theory of Mind Mechanism (ToMM) propagate thinking about gods. While the ADD recognises the presence and activities of agents, the ToMM ascribes various mental states to oneself and other agents in order to interpret their intentions (Tremlin 75). Thus, humans intuitively connect “physical causality to mental causality” (80). In Bank’s first mainstream novel it is Frank who assumes that things, such as the Factory, are able to think and possess independent minds. Such beliefs brings him consolation, therefore he equips the device with extraordinary mental qualities. The
Wasp Factory becomes a supernatural being capable of predicting future. Also worth mentioning is the fact that the birth of Frank’s faith happens with ease in isolated, almost experimental surroundings, with the young man having no contact with priests, theologians or any religious institutions (which further supports the point of religion’s naturalness).

Men can interact with gods, and this is what makes gods so enticing. But, whereas human knowledge has its limits, supernatural beings are perceived and represented as possessing complete and accurate information about strategic facts (Boyer 2000). Knowledge is power: this popular saying could sum up the main function of deities. Objectively speaking, in case of Wasp Factory, Frank’s knowledge is ultimately limited, since he is unsure about both his past and his future, does not have good contact with his brother, and his father keeps a mysterious locked room just beyond reach. Frank suffers from knowledge deprivation. He admits to having been tutored by his father, who found it amusing to teach him nonsense: “My father once had me believing that the earth was a Mobius strip, not a sphere” (Banks 12). Young Frank believed Angus, and unwittingly shared such “facts” with family and acquaintances – to his utter shame, and their amusement.

It may be argued that Frank poses as an omniscient deity in order to compensate for gaps in knowledge, fatherly lies, and existential uncertainty. For the lack of strategic information about himself, Frank creates his own image as an almighty hero possessing superpowers: a man who killed three individuals and is the only one to know the truth about their fate. Tremlin writes that supernatural, omniscient beings tend to be construed as possessing a moral perspective on people’s inner convictions and their behaviour (117). As if he were a god, Frank punishes wrongdoings: after his cousin Blyth incinerates Eric’s rabbits, Frank ruthlessly murders him, believing that Blyth’s death is “a judgment from God” (Banks 41).

The actions of gods are supernatural, yet they stay social. Thus, gods may be perceived as a part of human earthly sphere: accessible and prone to engage in people’s everyday existence. Such a belief grants sense to activities like prayer, ritual, or sacrifice. The interaction between gods and people is “characterized by giving and receiving, by promises and protection, by reward and punishment” (Tremlin 113). On the one hand, Frank feeds the Factory with wasps in order to receive answers, guidance and protection. On the other hand, Frank, being himself a master of the island, punishes wrongdoings and attempts at protecting his insane brother by performing himself complicated rituals involving Saul’s skull and the Wasp Factory.

The Factory itself comprises of a huge clock face, which once belonged to the Bank of Scotland. Maureen Speller pinpoints its importance as a doubled symbol of order (28): ritual allows Frank to keep things under control, because it forms a “defensive wall” around him (Kincaid 25–26). However, while
humans have, without doubt, a natural predilection for ritualistic behaviour (McCauley 150), scientists suggest that all rituals are meaningless, while people only arbitrarily tack meanings to them. Frank’s actions illustrate this phenomenon: he constructed the Factory using specific materials in a specific configuration, which would not disrupt his obsessive-compulsive need for symmetry. Similarly, he killed Esmerelda to fulfil his ritualistic drive towards maintaining order:

I could feel it in my guts, in my bones; I had to. It was like an itch, something I had no way of resisting, like when I walk along a pavement in Porteneil and I accidentally scuff one heel on a paving stone. I have to scuff the other foot as well, with as near as possible the same weight, to feel good again. (Banks 88)

Frank’s actions seem meaningless. He makes sudden decisions, even in case of such grave matters as killing his cousins. At the same time Frank deeply believes that man possesses a place and purpose in a larger, cosmic pattern (117). His rituals are supposed to bring him knowledge and power, therefore he imagines the Wasp Factory as a mediator, a supernatural force which is responsible for his convictions and events happening around him. This goes in line with Boyer’s argument that ideas about gods follow from rituals, and not the other way round, as was until recently believed. Boyer suggests that supernatural beings are added to ritualistic behaviours, because they fill the gap between the ritual and its supposed effect (237).

Through immersing the reader in Frank’s psyche, Banks points to the fact that our brain may be perceived as the centre of our universe, for it receives and organises all sensations. It gathers perceptions of the world and one’s self-image. Banks seems to suggest that the brain generates images of what men assume the world to be. At the same time, this magnificent organ is susceptible to illusions – it makes automatic, unconscious inferences which shape our experience (McCauley 43). Frank’s brain provides him with an illusion of fierceness, knowledge and power. Paul Kincaid writes that “all Frank’s violent masculinity seems to be compensation for his emasculation, except that we learn this never happened” (29–30). Most importantly, the Wasp Factory turns out to be a meaningless fraud, but there are other numerous illusions that Frank falls victim to. Since young children do not grasp the fact that other people’s representations of reality may be false (Henry Wellman, in McCauley 78–79), Angus makes young Frank believe in curious shapes of planets, but he also forces his son into a bit more influential conviction about being castrated by a vicious dog. These illusions comprise Frank’s worldview, shaping both his consciousness and his sense of self for many years ahead.

Consciousness is the inescapable human reality. From the neuroscientific perspective, people are born dualists, because they are able to discern agents
The Nature of Religion in I. Banks’s Novels: *The Wasp Factory* and *Consider Phlebas*

from passive objects and to ascribe thoughts, emotions and intentions to other individuals. In the Kantian and Cartesian philosophical tradition, thoughts have been traditionally attributed with an abstract, immaterial quality, and mind has been perceived as something both immaterial and superior to the body. While it is not difficult to admit that the body is an entirely physical entity, somewhere beyond it lurks an unshakeable conviction that there is more to man than mere matter – a special power of the “mind” or the “soul” that transcends physicality. Edward Slingerland argues that humans are unwilling to accept the fact that thoughts and ideas are all products of the material body, while the belief in the separateness and superiority of the mind is in fact an illusion created by the biological brain itself, or, to phrase it otherwise, an adaptive evolutionary solution (25).

In his discussion of divided selves, Paul Kincaid postulates that in the *Wasp Factory* “every member of the Cauldham family seems to be both damaged and doubled” (29). Frank has his mirror in Eric, Angus in Agnes, and little Paul in Old Saul. While Kincaid attributes this dividing and doubling to the tradition of Scottish fantastic in which reality and fantasy are of equal importance, I argue that it also belongs to Banks’s ruminations on, quite literally, the nature of human psyche and its predilection towards dualistic thinking, as well as the penchant for creating personalised illusion, which is widely known as the “conscious self.” Kincaid is right to state that “because *The Wasp Factory* shows us only one reality, as alienating and disconcerting as that may be, the question of which reality is privileged does not arise” (35). The mind is able to create deities - and even though they may be termed as fantasy, they are inescapably real, as well.

Humans possess the theory of mind, which allows them to understand any story “in terms of agents, their states of mind, and the sequences of their actions” (McCauley 185). The theory of mind is a tool used to integrate divergent experiences into a coherent narrative of our life, to “forge our sense of self,” understand the past, and predict the future. It also underlies the creation of myths, in which things often become agents acting in a rational and intentional manner (McCauley 185–186). According to Merlin Donald, myths allow for making sense of our experiences (347, 368), while religions usually traffic in mythical narratives (McCauley 185–186).

In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank creates many personalised myths: he arranges various, often disconnected, events from his, Angus’s and Eric’s life, as well as things of mere chance happening on the island into a coherent story which he understands in terms of agents and their mind-states. He creates a myth of the Wasp Factory, as well as the myth of himself, because it helps him to cognitively integrate the chaos and brutality of experience. What is more, Banks seems also intent on showing the reader the power of mythical story-telling: he makes Frank’s highly improbable narrative absolutely real and plausible. The story
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attenuates probability: this is why its denouement, the truth learnt at the end is so surprising. Both Frank’s and the reader’s natural cognitive and emotional tendencies entice to unreflectively accept information, and this is how mythical thinking works.

Religious thinking helps Frank in everyday life, because it offers him answers, consolation, the sense of an order and integrity. In addition to being natural, it is practical. Paradoxically, Banks shows that these could not be stated considering scientific thought, since most theories are inherently speculative and impractical. The knowledge about the shape of the Earth goes beyond folk intuitions and perception – in the long run it does not matter, whether Earth is a sphere or a Möbius strip. As for personal, everyday experience, the Earth is rather flat. Scientific truth is very often “overwhelmingly incompatible with our common sense conceptions of space and time and matter” (McCauley 109). Common-sense intuition makes Frank believe that he is a not-so-complete boy, because he is physically and mentally strong, has to shave his beard and loves fight and booze, just as any stereotypical man should. Besides, his father told him a believable story of childhood. Only making a claim that goes beyond what Frank knows allows him to learn the truth about his sexual nature. This claim is very difficult to make: even when Frank discovers the male hormones in his father’s study, he still believes in his maleness, supposing that his father is a woman in disguise.

In the end, does Frank’s discovery change anything? In the last chapter Frank provides justifications for his self-image and behaviour, stating: “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” (Banks 182). Scientists argue that human cognitive capacities exist not to hand the truth about the world, but to let us survive and adapt to the environment. Frank’s thinking is therefore appropriate, due to the fact that “[s]cience becomes cognitively unnatural, however, because it reliably traffics, usually sooner rather than later, in representations that are radically counterintuitive” (McCauley 107).

On the one hand, then, religious thought is driven by mechanisms utterly different from scientific ruminations. On the other hand, science is also often based on what we wish to believe in:

[s]cientists are human, and humans are driven by what psychologists call “confirmation biases” (we love evidence that supports our view) and “disconfirmation biases” (we disparage evidence that undermines our view). (de Waal 95–96)

Frank’s father hates women, so he does not want Frank to become one. He stuffs his daughter with both male hormones and potassium bromide, revelling in the belief that more hair on her face is enough to make her male. Banks employs
such a plot because, in my opinion, he is intent on showing that science is prone to being influenced by subjective thinking, including personal frustrations and desires. Therefore, science can be very similar to religion, if only one considers its cognitive basis.

Iain Banks’s first speculative fiction novel, Consider Phlebas, may be also perceived as examining what is cognitively natural. Even though it is set nine thousand years into the future, Bank’s humans did not change much: he suggests that cultural changes speed dramatically compared to biological evolution. According to contemporary scientists, people operate today with “most of the same cognitive equipment that prehistoric hunter-gatherers possessed” (McCauley 54). Banks develops on this point. Even though his novel belongs to the science fiction genre, in the Culture science is virtually non-existent – technology is so developed, life so easy, that scientific thought is no longer needed. It is true that from the historical perspective, since the 19th century science and technology have been inextricably connected: “theoretical progress in science has created and improved increasingly widespread technologies,” which include everyday electronics, medical tools, spacecraft and war machinery just to mention a few examples (McCauley 88). Science is, however, understood as cognitively unnatural – as I have already shown in my discussion of The Wasp Factory. Pure science has rarely arisen in the human history (Donald 311), while men have always constructed new technologies. Both religion and technology date from the prehistoric past (McCauley 148). In the second half of the 20th century science has become so complex, so counterintuitive (suffice it to mention complexity theory, anti-matter and universe with at least a dozen dimensions), that the public becomes “increasingly less literate scientifically, as time passes” (McCauley 285–286). The reality described in Consider Phlebas is just a step ahead, with its utter lack of scientists and omnipresence of engineering.

Life is so comfortable that humans seem to be intellectually passive. They are still mortal, but thanks to “genofixing” they can live virtually forever, preoccupied with their little pleasures “such as sport, games, romance, studying dead languages, barbarian societies and impossible problems, and climbing high mountains without the aid of a safety harness” (Banks 87). The Culture is a hedonistic paradise based on the negation of pain and death. Ursula Goodenough states that the comprehension and fear of impending death is commonly considered as one of the reasons for religious thinking (149–151), and it would seem that Banks presents the utopian Culture as absolutely secular, because it does not need deities. It is argued, however, that large-scale societies do need imagined or real supervision (as opposed to small groups in which people perfectly know one another): big groups need big, powerful gods, who watch over everything they do (Norenzayan and Hansen 174–187, Norenzayan and Shariff 58–62). It could be assumed that in Consider Phlebas the Minds, or sentient machines in general, take over the role of gods, since “[g]ods are first and foremost
intentional agents, *beings with minds*” (Tremlin 102). In the Culture nothing said goes unrecorded; nothing experienced unnoticed (Banks 87). The Minds “up there” are watching and evaluating each individual’s actions, for they became so intelligent that no human is capable of understanding how smart they are (Banks 86). They meet the “requirement” of gods, which, according to Todd Tremlin, equals being sentient social agents possessing both strategic information and a moral perspective (113–118).

Horza understands that the Culture made their gods material, truly omniscient and almighty (86–87). In fact, this idea bears close resemblance to the already discussed Wasp Factory, which may be understood both as a technological and a religious item. Though while for Frank it is a perfectly natural state of matters, for Horza it is both dangerous and far from being natural. Horza believes that deities should stay as they were for thousands of years, meaning to be the imaginary products of the brain tissue. This is the reason for him supporting the Idirans, hence life: “boring, old-fashioned, biological life; smelly, fallible and short-sighted, God knows, but real life” (Banks 29). The Idirans perceive themselves as agents of God who desires order in the universe, therefore they are waging an imperialistic conquest against other civilizations (157–158). For Horza it is the ultimate naturalness of such wishful thinking that makes the Idirans normal, in contrast to the Culture being an evolutionary dead end (158–159). Slingerland writes:

> In cognitively fluid humans, reward expectancy over long-term tasks may be maintained at least in part by the feeling that some metaphorical conspecific “up there” is watching and approving or disapproving of our actions, or (in its modern iteration) a more diffuse, nontheistic sense that what we are doing “matters” – a conceit that makes no sense unless we project some sort of abstract, metaphorical agency onto the universe. (286)

Horza notices that Idirans believe in a purpose to life. What he falls short of noticing, however, is the idea that the penchant for technology may be as natural as the love of gods. Thus, he seems to be oblivious of the fact that the Culture’s belief in agency and purpose directly mirrors the zeal of Idirans. The Culture allegedly has, what Slingerland calls a “nontheistic sense” that what they are doing is meaningful; it has “[t]he urge not to feel useless”:

> The Culture’s sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works; the secular evangelism of the Contact Section, not simply finding, cataloguing, investigating and analysing other, less advanced civilisations but – where the circumstances appeared to Contact to justify so doing – actually interfering (overtly or covertly) in the historical processes of those other cultures. (Banks 451)
It appears that the Culture fights because, regardless of its materialist and practical outlook, it fears “the destruction of its spirit; the surrender of its soul” (Banks 452–455). The Minds are cognitively human-like: they have “drives,” “ideas” and a wish to “clean up the galaxy, make it run on nice, efficient lines, without waste, injustice or suffering” (35).

As I have already mentioned in the discussion of *The Wasp Factory*, scientists and philosophers imply that humans are born dualists with an ingrained tendency to perceive reality as divided into objects and agents. While it is easy to admit that each body is a material evolutionary product, people tend to believe that there is something more than that to their existence. From the cognitive perspective this is why humans believe in the immaterial mind or soul which gives purpose to human life. The Culture’s Minds, evolving from technology made by humans and human-made machines, seem to possess a very similar mind-set to humans. They are, however, godlike: all-powerful, fear-inciting, and omniscient. In the Culture’s realm, such a situation proves evolutionarily successful: the Culture is spreading, while the Minds “are the very image and essence of the life itself” (333–334).

Horza is appalled by the realisation that life can be engineered from mere matter, even though he himself is “the product of careful thought and genetic tinkering and military planning and deliberate design.” He was bioengineered to become a Changer: an individual capable of mimicry (336). Horza’s disgust only exposes to what extent Culture’s technology is alive. “When technology operates normally its workings are hidden, effortless, and as if magical” states Christopher Palmer (78). Like life itself, and like the workings of the body, technology remains unseen unless it begins to malfunction.

Horza appears not to accept the notion that thinking is an embodied process, while thoughts are physical states of matter within brains. The idea of no “superphysical soul or self, outside of the chain of physical causation, controlling or overseeing the process” (Slingerland 257) horrifies him. Paul Churchland states that since we can train ourselves to adequately perceive the shape of the Earth, we can also force ourselves to correctly comprehend what we are, which inevitably involves disposing of dualist illusions and folk psychological concepts in order to accept ourselves being mere matter (30–34). Yet Banks shows that it might be very troubling to hold a view that all living creatures are just physical, material systems produced by a mindless process lacking any purpose, while the sense of uniqueness equals just one of many illusions which the brain produces.

Within the perspective of cognitive sciences, whatever thoughts people have and whatever they write or speak about is a product of their brains. According to the developments in neurobiology, these complex organs make us what we are – as individuals and as a species. “In every domain of human life, the brain is the seat of knowledge, including the knowledge of god,” writes
I therefore suggest that Iain Banks perceives that the beauty and power of cognition, the astonishing intelligence of living sentient beings as grounded in the material, fragile body. Ultimately, in his novels humans mean almost nothing (Palmer 80), but it does not mean that with the use of their innate, biological wiring they cannot create complex social structures, ingenious technologies, or even gods.

Notes

1 Robert N. McCauley emphasises the fact that even though religious thinking is natural, not everything concerning religion belongs to the biological propensity of the mind, since “religions exhibit recurrent cognitive features, but not all of the features they exhibit are cognitive and not all of their cognitive features are recurrent” (148).

2 Iain M. Banks is the pseudonym used by Iain Banks to publish his science fiction works, as explained in the BBC interview Five Minutes With: Iain M Banks.

3 For more information one might refer to David Punter’s The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day (1996) or to Andrew M. Butler’s article “Strange Case of Mr. Banks: Doubles and The Wasp Factory” published in Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction 76 (Summer 1999).

4 Berthold Schoene-Harwood offers a developed analysis of gender relations in “Dams Burst: Devolving Gender in Iain Banks’s The Wasp Factory,” an article published in ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 30.1 (1999). For further information one may also refer to Paul Kincaid’s “Far Too Strange: The Early Fiction of Iain Banks” published in Foundation, issue 42.116 (2013). Both authors also noticed the novel’s indebtedness to the tradition of intertextuality, pointing to the similarities between Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein or William Golding’s Lord of the Flies and The Wasp Factory, which is a topic worth further investigation, but which stays, nevertheless, beyond the scope of my article.


**References**


