# In the Shadow of the Culture

## The Ethics of Intervention, AI Rights, and Utopia in Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist*

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Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist* (2004), a Hugo Award nominee for Best Novel in 2005, has attracted far less critical attention than his Culture novels despite being a remarkable work. Born of the author's wish to develop his science fiction beyond the Culture's universe, *The Algebraist* is a complex novel displaying in its dense pages Banks's wondrous imagination. Here I consider the ways in which the main civilizations he depicts in it, the Mercatoria and the Dwellers, connect with key issues raised in the Culture novels: the ethics of intervention in other civilizations, the use of AIs, and the nature of utopia. The Culture, as I argue, casts a long shadow but Banks's decision to explore another narrative universe allows him to examine these fundamental issues from a different angle. *The Algebraist* complements, nonetheless, his main tenets in the Culture series.

*The Algebraist* (2004) is a stand-alone science fiction novel by Scottish author Iain M. Banks (1954–2013), like *Against a Dark Background* (1993), *Feersum Endjinn* (1994), and, arguably, *Transition* (2009).[1] Known for his singular dual career combining realist literary fiction and science fiction, Banks was the author of eight novels in the Culture series—*Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998),[2] *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012)—and of *The State of the Art* (1991), a short fiction collection also within this universe. *The Algebraist*, published between *Dead Air* (2002), the eleventh of Banks's fourteen mainstream novels, and *Matter* (2008), the seventh Culture novel, came ten years after his last excursion outside the Culture with *Feersum Endjinn*. Although his publishers preferred him to write more Culture novels for obvious commercial reasons, Banks confessed in an interview that he felt "the need not to be just a one trick pony when it comes to science fiction" and so "be able to do other stuff as well as the Culture" (Wiseall).

In "A Few Notes on the Culture" (1994), an essay written as background information for his series, Banks described the Culture as a "group-civilisation

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formed from seven or eight humanoid species, space-living elements of which established a loose federation approximately nine thousand years ago" in our galaxy. The Culture progressively constituted itself as a society based on the principle of "socialism within, anarchy without," as Banks puts it in the same document, by delegating its management to the ultra-advanced AIs known as the Minds. These sentient beings, each with their own unique personality, freed the citizens of the Culture from the need to work by running a post-capitalist, post-scarcity economy eschewing, as Banks notes in his first published Culture novel *Consider Phlebas* (1987), all "considerations of wealth or empire" (451). Money is irrelevant in the Culture because "the capacity of its means of production ubiquitously and comprehensively exceeded every reasonable (and in some cases, perhaps, unreasonable) demand its not unimaginative citizens could make" (451). The Culture needs not "colonise, exploit, or enslave" (451) because its citizens live in colossal space vehicles, in orbitals, and on artificial planets that can be built cheaply, taking their energy from stars. Free to run their lives as they wish and to enjoy the advantages of ultra-sophisticated techniques for bodily enhancement, the post-human Culture citizens live in a society "drawn up from the 'best self', and ideal image, of the West, a communist utopia of plurality, tolerance, and plenitude" (Brown 71). Banks, however, does not focus his novels on the conflicts that may arise within his utopia, finding that option not particularly enticing, but rather, in his own words, on "the difference between the utopian point of view of the Culture and whatever dark deeds are being got up by the less utopian characters in [each] novel" (Nolan 66). These can be internal dissidents or external agents, though most conflicts are caused by the intervention of the Culture's organization Contact in other less advanced civilizations that are not always willing to welcome utopia.

*The Algebraist* springs, according to Banks, from "an idea that could only work in a non-Culture universe" (Wiseall), namely, how the collapse of its indispensable wormhole portal network disconnects a major civilization, the Mercatoria, from the planetary societies it dominates, making it vulnerable. This complex novel, nominated for the Hugo for Best Novel in 2005, is not, however, as detached from the Culture novels as the author's words might suggest. The main civilizations depicted in it, the Mercatoria but also their neighbors the Dwellers, actually connect with main concerns explored in the Culture novels: the ethics of intervention in less privileged civilizations, the use of ultra-advanced AIs, and how utopia operates. The Culture, as I argue here, casts a long shadow over the Mercatoria and the Dwellers, though Banks's exploration of this other narrative universe helps him to examine these key issues from a different perspective, which is certainly also worth exploring.

Briefly, *The Algebraist* narrates the efforts of human scholar Fassin Taak to locate the coordinates of a fabled alternative wormhole network, supposedly run by the Dwellers, when the Mercatoria's own system collapses for unknown reasons. Taak, a specialist in the Dwellers' lore, is an inhabitant of the Ulubis star system and as such a subject of the Mercatoria, whose rulers actually force him to undertake a mission he knows to be desperate and most likely fruitless. A problem that needs to be acknowledged is that *The Algebraist* is, as reviewer Donna McMahon notes, "meandering, hugely expository, self-indulgent space opera" in need of "a ruthless pruning that it did not receive." Justina Robson also complains in her review that *The Algebraist* "is great reading but it isn't a great novel," lacking "an editorial shepherd" to make it less "fat and compulsive." In her view, the main problem is how the excess of information and the author's "cheery, optimistic, absurd-aware" personality destroy any chances "for genuine pathos." I would agree with both reviewers. It takes two if not three readings to fully grasp how the mission of the capable, smart hero Fassin Taak transforms the whole political system of the galaxy. This is a problem common to all of Banks's science fiction novels because of the author's notoriously prolix narrative style. Matters are perhaps even more complicated in *The Algebraist* because there is a palpable tension emanating from Banks's wish to depart from his own Culture universe. He packs into this novel enough world building for several books—Banks referred to *The Algebraist* as a book "longer than I intended" that "probably could become a trilogy, but for now it's a standalone novel" (Mathieson)—causing even his most committed, patient readers to miss the nuances of the large conflicts exposed, both those connected with Taak's tragic personal life and the ones shaping the clash between the Mercatoria and the Dwellers. As Duggan notes, "What is so typical of Banks' talent for space opera is his capacity to weave together stories that take place at the level of a few individuals with narratives that span the galaxy and encompass whole civilizations" (19). *The Algebraist* is proof of this talent but demands much commitment from readers in order to follow the two narrative levels as they deserve.

William Hardesty argues that each of Banks's sf novels is "a spirited adventure" but each "mocks the very adventures it presents" (116), and this is true of *The Algebraist* as well, particularly in the segment of Taak's travels among the canny Dwellers. Banks's space opera, Hardesty adds, is "an unabashed example of the form" mixing "naïve entertainment and informed commentary simultaneously" (116) but also a self-conscious approach to a subgenre that can easily fall on the side of silliness. *The Algebraist* often

treads on very thin ground, threatening to collapse at any point, because even though the Mercatoria can be read relatively easily as a dangerous hierarchical oligarchy, the quirky Dwellers often appear to be a non-humanoid parody of the anarchistic Culture. They carry Banks's famous sense of "black comedy" (Craig 231) to extremes that often clash with the sheer horror of the situations they are involved in, and make it hard for readers to decide whether Fassin Taak's hazardous quest to find the legendary wormhole portal system they allegedly run is not altogether a huge practical joke (it is not).

Cairns Craig claims, quoting Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, that all of Banks's protagonists are subjected to rules which are the "'object of a contract, explicit or not, between players' in games" (232). Lyotard is discussing the rules of the post-modern language games left behind by the disappearance of the grand narratives and observes that "if there are no rules, there is no game" for "even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game" (10). This appears to be the major problem for Taak: he has been forced by the Mercatoria who rule his home planet to play the game of retrieving from the Dwellers key knowledge to reconnect the galaxy but these elusive beings keep changing the rules of the game, trying to secretly prevent Taak from succeeding while pretending to help him. When the disorienting game approaches its end, Taak finally realizes that his mission is a chance to become a player at a high level he never imagined, forcing both the Mercatoria and the Dwellers to change radically and play fairly. The comment that Slocombe offers on *Matter* also applies to *The Algebraist*: "the purpose of these meta-games" is not "to play (or be played), but to show that there is always a choice" (148). As he adds, "The moral of the story is that outside of the petty games of dominance and control is a larger, more complex game" (148), involving personal and collective freedom as Taak learns.

## Critical Dystopia and the Ethics of Species Intervention: The Mercatoria

Tom Moylan identifies the concept of the critical utopia as the "shared quality" in the fiction by authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Samuel Delany, emanating from "a rejection of hierarchy and domination and the celebration of emancipatory ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself" (11). Borrowing Moylan's concept, Caroti proposes "to conduct a systematized reading of the three non-Culture space operas—and particularly *The Algebraist*—as critical dystopias, since each begins under far from ideal circumstances and develops throughout

the text a concerted set of responses aimed at altering the original dystopia for the better" (225). Whereas the Culture novels can be said to be critical utopias since utopia itself is a subject of deep scrutiny, *The Algebraist* works in the direction Moylan indicates: to establish utopia from a critical position by transforming dystopia. The only problem with Caroti's approach is that the Mercatoria, though repressive and authoritarian, are not a downright dystopia but what the Culture might consider a viable candidate for utopian improvement. Although the narrator defines the Mercatoria's hierarchy as a "baroque monstrosity" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 230), Banks's colorful villain Luseferous, one of its opponents, realizes that though "disliked and resented by most of its citizens/subjects" the Mercatoria are "not actively hated by them" (483). Reviewer Sam Reader argues that "The author even extends a certain idealism toward the government of Ulubis, showing them as flawed, but not completely irredeemable—despite their rigid hierarchy," hinting that this is why Fassin Taak's own idealistic resistance is more moderate than should be expected from an anti-dystopian rebel.

Ulubis—the star around which the gas giant Nasqueron and its moon planets, including Taak's home 'glantine, orbit—is not the only space occupied by the Mercatoria, but is the focus in this novel of what James Kneale calls Banks's "particular 'geographical imagination'" (45). The galaxy in *The Algebraist*, Kneale explains, is "in effect a network space, made up of connections, but also gaps where links are absent. The plot depends upon—and is in fact set in motion by—this unevenness" (52). The Mercatoria are, in ways similar to the Culture, an alliance of mainly non-humanoid civilizations, dominated by the Culmina. They depend for its functioning on the Arteria, the system of wormhole portals that allows the diverse species to speed up interstellar travel in the absence of faster-than-light communications. Diverse wars had destroyed some of these portals at different points in history, until the establishment of the Mercatoria thousands of years before brought lasting peace to the many interconnected civilizations. In the most recent episode, the Machine War—waged about three hundred years before—Ulubis and presumably many other star systems lost their portals and were effectively cut off from the rest of the galaxy. When the plot starts unfolding, this star system is waiting for a new portal to be installed in about seventeen years' time. Ulubis's status as a remote, back-of-beyond system on "the outermost reaches of the galaxy" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 18) near the emptiness beyond the galactic plane is, thus, temporary. When the villain Luseferous, however, takes advantage of the disconnection and threatens to invade Ulubis, the whole planetary system runs out of time. Then the Mercatoria recruit Fassin Taak to find the coordinates for the portals

supposedly run by the Dwellers of Nasqueron, even though, as he knows, there is no factual evidence of their existence beyond myth.

The Mercatoria have spread a particular ideology based on the prominence of hierarchy (with no apparent gender discrimination), a shared religion, and an abhorrence of artificial intelligence throughout the galaxy. Timothy C. Baker argues that Banks's atheism cannot wholly erase the presence of God and religion in the Culture novels. The Culture may be "a utopian state free of religion" yet "the space for Godlike creators emerges" (106) nonetheless in the novels, both in the godlike Minds which run the whole civilization with no human supervision, and in creatures worshipped as gods such as the Xinthian Tensile Aeronathaur of *Matter*. The Culture, Baker insists, "is presented as a society in which freedom from religion is itself a religion" (106). In contrast, in *The Algebraist* religion is an integral element yet at the same time an example of Banks's habitual religious skepticism, with a touch of humor. The Truth, as the Mercatorian faith is called, is the first "post-scientific, pan-civilisational religion" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 249); it is not imposed but treated, rather, as a sort of universally shared, official philosophy of life. Banks's narrator explains that the Truth "rose from the belief that what appeared to be real life must in fact—according to some piously invoked statistical certitudes—be a simulation being run within some prodigious computational substrate in a greater and more encompassing reality beyond" (247). The villain Luseferous, a rogue Archimandrite of its Church, suspects that "the higher you went, the greater grew the proportion of those who didn't really believe at all" (277), yet remains intrigued by the solid faith of many believers in view of the absurdity of the Truth's main premise.[3]

The issue of how civilizations may integrate artificial intelligence in their fabric occupies quite a prominent position in the plot but from a very different angle than in the Culture novels. "The entire history of the Mercatoria," the narrator reports, "was the record of its implacable persecution and destruction of AIs and the continual, laborious, zealously pursued effort to prevent them ever again coming into existence within the civilised galaxy" (102), especially after the Machine War. Although Banks does not clarify what motivates the Mercatoria's deep hatred of artificial intelligence it may be assumed that any sentient AI could threaten the ubiquity of the Truth, perhaps by offering proof that no computer could run a simulation as complex as life. The Mercatoria have established a religious-military order, the Lustrals of Cessoria, in charge of persecuting and even publicly executing any suspected AIs, though the civilization does use computers as long as they are not sentient. Another order, the Shrievalty Ocula, to which Fassin Taak is eventually forcibly seconded in his

mission, monitors the most advanced computers to make sure that they do not develop advanced capacities. Since "Banks's advocacy of AI rights is as fierce and unyielding as that of the most persistent rights activist campaigning against racism or other forms of oppression" (Hubble et al. 8), and since the Minds are central in the Culture and in his novels, AI ill-treatment is one of the aspects that characterizes the Mercatoria most firmly as a dystopia. Actually, this is the matter at the very core of the plot for, unbeknownst to them, the AIs secretly sheltered by the welcoming Dwellers have caused the Arteria's collapse. This was a desperate measure taken during the Machine War to protect other fellow AIs from the Mercatoria's genocidal brutality. Even Taak himself becomes a direct victim of the Mercatoria's fanatical hatred of AIs. His family, the Sept Bantrabal, secretly harbors an AI passing as its head gardener (this is the novel's narrator), though Taak is unaware of the situation. The head of the Sept makes the serious mistake of also protecting a basic AI sent by the Mercatoria to brief Taak about his mission, despite orders to destroy it immediately. The Cessoria, and not the enemy Beyonders regularly used as scapegoats by the Mercatoria, wipe out Taak's whole family and home for this crime, thus sending a clear message to anyone tempted to help any AIs.

Each human family or Sept in the Ulubis system is a center for Dweller Studies. Taak is himself a Slow Seer, that is to say, a sort of cultural anthropologist who has adapted his bodily metabolism to the slow rate that allows Dwellers to enjoy extraordinary lifespans. The Culture, Leach points out, is "a vision of a posthuman society" (71) and so is the human society within the Mercatoria. Like the Culture citizens, they have learned to choose their looks to the point that all are attractive and "The only ugly people were those making a statement" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 45). The oldest Seer mentioned in the novel is 1700 years old, far more than the average 300-400 years a Culture citizen can live.

These posthumans are apparently well-integrated in the Mercatoria but have a problematic backstory which connects with the Culture's propensity to intervene in other civilizations. As Jackson and Heilman note,

> the justification for imposing the Culture's values onto the Other comes from the Culture's belief in its capacity to act rationally. It sees itself as ordering its society according to rational moral laws. Provided that the faculty of reason is universal, any other civilization that possesses the faculty of reason would agree to live according to the Culture's laws. (248)

This is a position firmly rejected, among others, by Mendlesohn and Vint, though from very different perspectives. For Mendlesohn the Culture acts predatorily, like the now extinct Soviet Union in its decadent final phase,

attempting "to 'civilise' its neighbours" by imposing "upon them autocracy, monarchy and fascism" (116). Vint, in contrast, sees an analogy of a completely different sign suggesting that "the parallels between the Culture's imperialism as guided by its Minds and US capitalist imperialism as guided by the 'needs' of corporations provide a useful structure for generating insights into the implications of cultural imperialism" (93). Banks himself defends a benevolent view of intervention, noting that "The point is that the Culture can feasibly argue that, when it does interfere, it has the best interests of the populations it is interfering with at heart. As opposed to, say—oh—the best interests of the shareholders of Standard Oil, Bechtel, Halliburton and so on" (Wilson 55). Yet, in *The Algebraist* the tenet of rational, altruistic intervention is questioned by presenting the Mercatoria as downright galactic bullies no matter how well-intentioned they believe they are. The procedure followed by the Mercatoria's equivalent of the Culture's Contact, the Culmina, diversely called "Prepping, Lifting or Aggressive Mentoring" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 151), has been applied to many other species and constitutes the basis of the Mercatoria's rule of the galaxy. Taak is taught, like any other human child, that the Culmina sent their henchmen, the Vohen, to Earth in 4051 BC (the current date is 4034 AD) to collect human genetic material, either samples or whole individuals from the main human civilizations of the time—the Maya in Mexico, the Chinese, and the Egyptians. Thus, a divide was set between the rHumans (the original, retrograde Humans) that remained on Earth unaware of this theft and the aHumans (or advanced Humans) of the rest of the galaxy, whom they eventually met when the Earthlings developed interstellar travel. As Taak's embittered great-uncle Fimender tells him, aHumans are "Advanced but cowed. Servant species, just like everybody else" (149). It can still be argued that the Mercatoria's Culmina act for the good of the intervened species whom they dominate but do not enslave, yet this is, to all effects, a far more intrusive kind of intervention than any by the Culture, which never aims at creating any type of galactic federation or empire.

According to Labuschagne,

> The Culture is shown to be devious and manipulative in ways that consistently transgress the laws of this utopia it purports to have set up for itself, so that the idea (and the ideal) of the subject's freedom is compromised; insofar as freedom is an integral part, even the object, of the utopian dream, this in turn casts doubt on the feasibility of this, or any, utopia. (62)

She further claims that Banks's Culture novels employ "a deconstructive double gesture so as to interrogate the meaning of freedom […] mainly by means of

irony" (62). There is no such irony in *The Algebraist*. The Mercatoria, as happens with many other authoritarian regimes, sees themselves as a utopia, hence their prepping policies towards other less enlightened civilizations. Unlike the Culture, however, which genuinely believes in the freedom of its citizens, the Mercatoria may torture their own citizens into submission, as a shocked Taak learns. In his youth Taak takes part in a rather minor conflict connected with the takeover of a publicly owned orbital habitat by the local authorities and, to his horror, he finds himself arrested and brutally tortured. His Orwellian torturer teaches him a lesson he has missed so far: "You are not stupid. Misguided, idealistic, naïve, certainly, but not stupid. You must know how societies work. You must at least have an inkling. They work on force, power and coercion" (180). The violence inflicted on his body and Taak's realization that the Dweller civilization operates in other terms result in his deciding to train as a Seer and to become a spy for the Beyonders, the rather feeble anti-Mercatoria resistance. Roberts observes that "Banks's writing considers the vulnerability of the masculine body as the foundation of the masculine subject" (46), and the torture of the so far diffident Taak is certainly a case of vulnerability leading to political awakening and full male subjecthood.

This does not mean that Taak believes in an eventual victory. He "despised the Mercatoria, hated the whole vicious, cretinous, vacuously self-important, sentience-hating system" but "he'd never had any illusions about the unalloyed niceness of the Beyonders or any other large group, or thought that a struggle against the Mercatoria would be other than prolonged, painful and bloody" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 284). When his Sept is destroyed and he considers abandoning the mission, Taak realizes that his hope, that "there would somehow be an elegance about his involvement in the struggle against the Mercatoria, a degree of gloriousness, a touch of the heroic" (284), is misguided:

> Instead: muddle, confusion, stupidity, insane waste, pointless pain, misery, and mass death–all the usual stuff of war affecting him as it might affect anybody else, without any necessary moral reason, without any justice and without any vindictiveness, just through the ghastly, banal working-out of physics, chemistry, biochemistry, orbital mechanics and the shared nature of sentient beings existing and contending. (284)

Taak is, then, one of Banks's "recalcitrant and unregenerate non-conformists and malcontents, the flawed dissenters and misfits" (Winter 333). In his case, however, far from chafing "under the thumb of the Culture" and yearning "to escape with an intensity seemingly gratuitous in the utilitarian perfection

of this ideal utopia" (333), Taak is secretly undermining a suffocating regime that sees itself as utopia but that is, if not the ugliest of dystopias, at least hypocritically repressive. His discomfort and his family tragedy are far more serious concerns, though, than any dissidence a Culture citizen tired of privileged utopia may feel.

Once Taak successfully completes his mission to locate the Dweller portals, he visits his family's refugee AI to announce that he has become a fully committed Beyonder and a citizen of the galaxy, fighting so that "One day we'll all be free" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 534). There is not, however, a cathartic destruction of the Mercatoria but the establishment of a new situation that will presumably gradually erode the inflexible political regime. The same applies to the Dwellers but from a completely different perspective, to which I turn next.

## Species Success and the Duty to Share: The Dwellers

If the Mercatoria are defined by their practice of intervening in the fate of other species without their consent, the Dwellers are defined by their total indifference towards the rest of the galaxy. This species's selfishness, which is an object of constant critique in *The Algebraist*, is based on the Dwellers' smug sense of their uniqueness, which in turn is based on their singular approach to time. The Dwellers are one of the Slow species as opposed to the rest, the Quick. Their timescale is different because both at an individual and at a collective level they live extremely prolonged lives. The Dwellers, present in almost all gas giants in the galaxy since time immemorial, "both despised and felt sorry for the Quick—the species, like humans, like all the others in the Mercatoria, which felt the need to use wormholes" (111), though as it later transpires this is a quite hypocritical, self-righteous feeling. Since the Dwellers "had been around for most of the life of the galaxy" (22), are "unusual and unique" (22), and have "retentive memories and very large libraries" (22) they have become a thrilling object of research for scholar Seers such as Taak. He appreciates in particular that, unlike the Mercatoria, the Dwellers have had "the good grace not to remake the whole place to suit themselves" and instead spend their lives "tending the greatest accumulations of knowledge ever assembled" (61).

Guerrier notes that in a post-scarcity society such as the Culture "it is always possible to accommodate choice" (30), which is why "What is crucial to the people of the Culture is *experience*—how they use the time they have" (30; emphasis original). Choice and experience are also fundamental

in the Dweller civilization. Unlike the Mercatoria but like the Culture, the Dwellers are a hedonistic anarchy, and though limited to a single species, with some variations, possess a singular non-humanoid physiology. Looking like "anorexic manta rays" in their childhood, the Dwellers

> then grew, fattened, split most of the way down the middle (adolescence, kind of), shifted from a horizontal to a vertical axis and ended up, as adults, basically, resembling something like a pair of large, webbed, fringed cartwheels connected by a short, thick axle with particularly bulbous outer hubs onto each of which had been fastened a giant spider crab. (Banks, *The Algebraist* 207)

Making the most of their circumstances, "the galaxy-spanning meta-civilisation (some would say post-civilisation)" (22) that constitutes the Dweller diaspora preceded all other civilizations in the galaxy. The Dwellers have survived for so long because they are virtually unconquerable at an individual and a collective level: they feel neither physical nor emotional pain and accept with indifference the elimination of any of their planetary communities as long as the species survives. Politically, the Dwellers "clove to a system in which power was distributed, well, more or less randomly, it sometimes seemed, and authority and influence depended almost entirely on one's age" (159). Indeed, their less savory aspect is that they hunt their young.[4] Socially, they operate by accumulating kudos, which enhances what might be defined as their cool; lacking a monetary system, they have no notions of class, in which they very much resemble the Culture. The Dwellers are not violent but have learned to channel their aggressiveness in wars waged as spectacular sports. However, as Luseferous discovers to his chagrin, the Dwellers are quite capable of defending themselves with ultra-sophisticated weaponry whenever an enemy threatens them. Their slow living also allows them to retaliate against any aggression when their enemies least expect it, even hundreds of years later. "A society," Kerslake observes, "may be utterly peaceful yet may still resort to violence in defense of its existence when threatened by a suitable unpleasant external menace. This suggests that utopia is more a nexus of re-action than pro-action: that utopia can only exist in an environment which does not seriously challenge its status quo and that it can only survive in relative or complete isolation" (214). Since in the Dwellers' case complete geographical isolation is impossible, given the presence of neighbors like the Mercatoria and other civilizations before them, they protect their utopia by living in gas planets nobody else covets and by sending the message that they should be respected.

Understanding that they are "arguably one of the galaxy's most successful species" (Banks, *The Algebraist* 160) the rest eventually leave the Dwellers alone:

> Left to themselves the Dwellers disturbed nobody except occasionally themselves and those who thought too deeply about what they really represented. Their history, after all, like that of the galaxy as a whole, was one of almost but not quite uninterrupted peace and tranquillity: billions and billions of years of thankfully nothing much happening at all. In over ten billion years of civilisation there had been only three major Chaoses and the number of genuine galaxy-spanning wars didn't even make it into double figures. In base eight!
>
> That was a record that the Dwellers seemed to feel everybody concerned ought to feel mildly proud of. Especially themselves. (161)

If this is not complete utopia, then it comes extremely close. The question indeed arises of what is the difference between a utopia and being a "most successful species" (160) in the galaxy. The Culture, acknowledged to be a utopia, is "a vast interstellar community where advanced technology provides nearly limitless material goods, sustenance, housing, and other comforts for every member" (Garrison 57), and so are the Dwellers. A main difference is that whereas, as Banks notes, the Culture avoids "terminal decadence" by stressing to its citizens that "its easy hedonism is not some ground-state of nature, but something desirable, assiduously worked for in the past, not necessarily easily attained, and requiring appreciation and maintenance both in the present and the future" ("A Few Notes"), the Dwellers' very high opinion of themselves cancels any self-criticism. Believing they are entitled to their privileged civilization prevents the Dwellers from feeling empathy for less fortunate species. That lack appears to be the main reason why they do not fully qualify as a utopia in Banks's criteria.

As the plot shows, though, not all is well in placid Dweller society. The Dwellers view the human Septs with amused tolerance, which makes Dweller Studies a daunting task. Taak causes a scholarly revolution by replacing traditional remote contact with direct communication on Nasqueron. For this, Seers like him need to use gascrafts, an intricate mixed suit and vehicle that turns researchers into cyborgian creatures. Possibly because of his willingness to bear the discomfort of field work for years, and for his genuine scholarly interest, Taak earns the trust of a number of key Dwellers, without realizing how he is being used in a subtle fight between factions. Mistrusting their fellow species in the galaxy, the Dwellers secretly built their own system when the Mercatoria's original Arteria system was disrupted; they told

no one but the legends about the portals emerged anyway. When one of Taak's minor findings unexpectedly leads the Mercatoria to deduce that the mythical portals do exist and might be instrumental to stop the oncoming war with Luseferous's armada, Taak remains skeptical, knowing how fond the Dwellers are of playing games with the Seers.[5] Finally understanding that the mathematical formula required to locate the portals points to the center of each Dweller planet, Taak suspects that he may have been induced to make this discovery. The two Dwellers he regards as his most trusted informers, Valseir and Seystyn, turn out to be opponents in the debate on whether the portals should be made accessible to the Mercatoria. Seemingly, Taak is a tool in Valseir's scheming to prevail and share the portals. In Banks's words, "when you have advantages of position, power or wealth, it is, frankly, a sign of insecurity to keep it all to yourself and try as hard as possible only to expand those advantages; what looks like increasing strength is entirely a sign of inner weakness" (Ludlow). Valseir arguably represents that position in Dweller society.

Although *The Algebraist* does not go further than the brief Epilogue on this matter, presumably once Taak discloses to the Beyonders (not to the Mercatoria) the existence of the Dweller wormhole portal system, they acquire sufficient leverage to force the Mercatoria to accept some changes. First, of course, the Dwellers must decide whether earning kudos all over the galaxy is worth the sacrifice of their independence. In the second place, the Mercatoria must accept their loss of total control over space travel. Another matter is left open. As Taak discovers during his mission, the Dwellers have sheltered in Nasqueron and all their many planets the AIs that survived the Machine War. Granting gracious access to the portals may give them the power to force the Mercatoria to reconsider their narrow-minded anti-AI stance for, as happens, a good number of the pilots navigating the portals are refugee AIs. As Pattie warns, though, for Banks it is never "a simple matter to replace one form of social organization (the hierarchical, which promotes and supports the self as isolated agent), with another (the communal, which promotes and supports the self in relation to the Other)," simply because "the structures supporting the hierarchical organization of society are very strong indeed, and they will actively resist attempts to dismantle them" (22). Taak's already quoted wish, or promise, that "One day we'll all be free" suggests, however, that they will be dismantled, not on the basis of aggressive resistance but of compromise. As for the Dwellers, though their own particular utopia runs no risk of external intervention, they will have to learn how to be truly integrated in the galaxy and perhaps even share some of the best features of their civilization.

## Conclusions: Close to the Culture

As I hope to have shown, Iain M. Banks's *The Algebraist* deserves far more scholarly attention than it has so far received, both because of its complex world building and for how this novel connects with the Culture series. The themes of whether superior civilizations have a right to intervene in the existence of the supposedly inferior civilizations, the integration of artificial intelligence in the fabric of society, and the utopia/dystopia divide are present in Banks's science fiction beyond the Culture series as *The Algebraist* shows. I have offered here, therefore, a comparative reading highlighting how the Mercatoria and the Dwellers mirror aspects of the Culture or depart from them, not because I believe that Banks could not escape his main universe but because there are fundamental connections between it and the one he created for *The Algebraist*.

On the one hand, with the Mercatoria Banks arguably responds to criticisms of the Culture as acting out of selfish motives by presenting a truly selfish society which really does intervene with no respect for the contacted. The Mercatoria, led by the Culmina, appear to exaggerate to a far worse extent the Culture's penchant for rational, benevolent intervention with their aggressive mentoring of other species, giving them no choice in the matter. Like the Culture, the Mercatoria see themselves as a utopian, advanced civilization but, dominated by their preference for rigid hierarchy, are unable to convince all their citizens of its full desirability or command their respect, hence their need for the brutally repressive monitoring of their lives. This is why the Beyonder resistance can recruit disaffected individuals like the perceptive, victimized Taak. It takes, however, the major crisis caused by the villain Luseferous's intended invasion and Taak's frantic search for the Dweller portals for the Mercatoria to reach a point in which structural social and political change is inevitable.

On the other hand, the Dwellers reach a similar situation after Taak realizes that their proud isolation hypocritically conceals a secret system of interplanetary communication, which they are not willing to share at all. Their sin of selfishness, however, is condoned because unlike the Mercatoria they have acted most generously toward the brutally persecuted AIs, whose rights, as noted, Banks has always championed in his fiction. The Dwellers share with the Culture a happy post-scarcity hedonism that makes their citizens personally and socially satisfied, while the whole species seems likely to outlast all the others in the galaxy thanks to their slow sense of time. Banks suggests with them, and with the Culture, that utopia consists of that type of

long-lasting individual and communal satisfaction, though he also implies that any successful civilization has a certain duty to help others, if not to reach utopia at least to lead better lives.

## Notes

1 While *Transition* was promoted as a mainstream novel by Iain Banks in the UK, in the US it was published under the name Iain M. Banks, which the author used for his science fiction. The American editors may have a point as *Transition* deals with the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics in a plot with distinct fantasy elements.

2 *Inversions* is not always included in the list of Culture novels, as there is no explicit mention of this civilization, except in a "Note on the Text" only included in the first hardback edition. In it the main female character Vosill is described as "without Argument, from a different Culture" by the text's supposed editor.

3 The simulation hypothesis was first suggested by philosopher Nick Bostrom in 2003, a year before Banks published *The Algebraist*, and may have inspired his construction of the Truth, though he usually wrote far in advance of publication. Supposing that "A technologically mature 'posthuman' civilization would have enormous computing power" (14), Bostrom deduces that we might be living in a simulation. It is hard to imagine, however, any civilization possessing that computing capacity. Intriguingly, although the Mercatoria hate AIs they do not seem to consider that their simulated life may be in their hands.

4 The Dwellers are male by default but become female on a voluntary basis to bear children. This is a process they pretty much hate. In contrast, Culture citizens enjoy changing sex as often as they wish. Banks argues that this led to "pressure for change" towards "some form of sexual equality" and eventual numerical parity ("A Few Notes"). This is not at all what happens in Dweller societies, in which gender is monolithic. Besides, even though it would be preferable to limit the pregnancies rather than hunt the children, who are routinely treated as slaves, the Dwellers claim that a regular cull by this violent means helps to keep their numbers under control. Nobody is perfect, Banks seems to suggest.

5 Similarly, Banks plays with his readers. Taak is doing research on an epic poem called *The Algebraist*, which deals with "mathematics, navigation as a metaphor, duty, love, longing, honour, long voyages home … all that stuff" (166; original ellipsis), in short, the themes of Banks's novel.

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